


everyone is an  
entrepreneur.  
nobody is safe.

The text is set against a light gray background. Behind the text, there are three horizontal yellow bars. From the bottom of these bars, several thick, irregular yellow paint drips hang down, extending towards the bottom of the gray section.

ENTREPRECARIAT  
Silvio Lorusso

**A COMPELLING AND RELENTLESS  
J'ACCUSE: DEBUNKING THE SOCIAL  
AND POLITICAL MYTHS THAT  
PUSH AN INCREASING NUMBER  
OF PERSONS TO PERFORM IN  
THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP CIRCUS  
— WITH NO SAFETY NETS.**

**Antonio Casilli, author  
of *En attendant les robots*, 2019**



ENTREPRECARIAT  
Silvio Lorusso  
ONOMATOPEE 170

**ENTREPRECARIAT**  
**Everyone Is an Entrepreneur.**  
**Nobody Is Safe.**

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*Entreprenariat:*  
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by Silvio Lorusso

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Silvio Lorusso

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Rotterdam, September 2019

**PRECARIOUS BY DESIGN**  
**Foreword by Geert Lovink**

*But don't you know what an average man is?  
He's a monster, a dangerous criminal.  
Conformist, colonialist, racist, slave trader, indifferent.*  
Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La ricotta*

We can't just have a life, we are condemned to design it. This is Silvio Lorusso's programmatic statement. Benetton's colourful 90s photography of global misery has become a daily reality. Slums are flooded by designer clothes and footwear. Versace refugees are no longer rarities. Envy and competition have turned us into subjects of an aesthetic conspiracy that is impossible to escape. We're going for the lifestyle of the rich and famous. The ordinary is no longer enough. We, the 99%, claim the exclusive lifestyle of the 1%. This is the aspiration of planet H&M.

The McLuhanesque programmatic "Help beautify junkyards" is now a global reality. Gone are the days when Bauhaus design was supposed to lift the daily lives of the working class. We're past the point of design as an extra layer, aimed to assist the hand and the eye. Design is no longer a pedagogic discipline that intends to uplift the taste of the 'normies' in order to give their daily lives sense and purpose.

Much like the pre-torn and bleached denim, all our desired commodities have already been used, touched, altered, mixed, liked and shared before we purchase them. We're pre-consumed. With the radical distribution of funky lifestyles comes the loss of semiology. There is no control anymore of meaning. Brands can mean anything for anyone. This is precarity of the sign.

In this book Silvio Lorusso confronts us with our beautified mess that is no longer an accident or a tragic sign

of a never-ending decay but an integral part of the overall layout. Today's design culture is an expression of our intense prototype lives. We, the exhausted class, want so much, we are the experience junkies, yet make remarkable little transformative progress. Our precarious state has become perpetual.

When we confront ourselves with sci-fi precarity — that strange techno-reality ahead of us — the first association that comes to mind is the conformist 1950s. Sure, we wished we lived in a *Blade Runner* movie, but our reality more resembles a Victor Hugo novel or a Douglas Sirk film in which the hyper-real takes command. Boredom, anxiety and despair are the unfortunate default. That's 'real existing precarity', comparable to 'real existing socialism' in the outgoing Cold War period. Casual precarity, everywhere you look. The terror of comfort drives us mad. The flatness of it all is contrasted, and accelerated, by the occasional modernism IKEA style that, in theory, should cheer us up and comfort us, but in the end only provoke us to an inner revolt against this manufactured reality. What's to be done with workers that have nothing to lose but their Ray-Ban sunglasses? We can't wait for Godot, not even for a split second. No matter how desperate the situation, the uprising simply won't happen. At best we attend a festival, expand our minds and body — and return to void.

In *The Courage of Hopelessness* from 2017 Slavoj Žižek writes about the antagonism that is generated between the precariat and the traditional working class. He writes: "One would have expected that the increasing exploitation would also strengthen workers' resistance, but it renders resistance even more difficult." The main reason for this, according to Žižek, is ideological: "precarious work is presented (and up to a point even

effectively experienced) as a new form of freedom.” For Žižek precarious workers are similar to consumers that are constantly confronted with the ‘freedom of choice’. We are becoming curators of our own life.

As Euronomade warns in their 2017 statement on platform capitalism, “we are in the presence of a protean composition of living labour, where a non-qualified worker works side-by-side with an ‘innovation professional’, all within a highly urbanized metropolitan landscape.” Some are more precarious than others. This is not merely measured in objective terms. Being precarious is a state of mind, a ‘psycho-class consciousness’ turned identity politics. This subcultural experience then opens the possibility to sympathize with the ‘real’ Others. Euronomade observes “that the contemporary press often evokes the appearance of millennials, the digital natives educated and grown up with the internet, together with migrants with a high-level education.”<sup>1</sup> Precarity can easily be read as a postmodern brand, a thousand flows of video clips, Insta stories and tweets that peacefully co-exist side by side, in a tolerant metropolitan setting that promotes multiculturalism as a way to tactically avoid talking about the hard facts of income disparity and segregation. But after we wake up, no longer under the spell of last night’s party, the depressing reality hits us hard.

There are multiple pre-histories of our condition. For instance, the evolution of precarious capitalism was only possible because advertising perfected messaging that forced people to see themselves as problems — to be solved by purchasing goods and services. Social me-

<sup>1</sup> Statement written for the Platform Capitalism event, organised by Euronomade in collaboration with Macao and held in Milan on the 3 and 4 March 2017 (<http://www.euronomade.info/?p=8830>).

dia designs have moved into a post-thing economy of virtual services and experiential consumerism that relies on the usually unpaid but occasionally monetized “first-person industrial complex.” No precarity without subjectivity. No precarity outside of the virtual: everything is possible, fluid, inside out, driven by political choices. The diminished expectations clashes with the pinkness of it all, the ecstasy of the event, the fireworks of the spectacle and the rush of the encounter. Precarity as an open and free lifestyle is getting stuck in a never-ending series of failures. Projects either fall through or never get finished. Life feels like an endless row of proposals. Why not enjoy the spectacle of the shitstorm, shake up the liberal elite that has humiliated you up to the point of crying, breaking down and burning-out?

It can be dangerous to go beyond good and evil and play with the alt-right route for once, vote for a trash party and enjoy the spectacle of this rotten world coming to an end. There is another resistance out there, which is reactionary and homogeneous. This is when a precarity 2.0 can turn ugly. Ready or not, this is the subjective shipwreck we’re facing. Vulnerable groups can easily be hijacked. Right-wing populism is entering the creative precarious class much faster than we would like to admit.

Let’s confront ourselves with the limitations of the precarity discourse itself. We can describe, map, visualize — and design — our misery very well. But without a subjective position this strategy turns out to be a trap. All we do is decorate an enlightened dead-end street. Like in a depression, there is no way out. No doubt, precarity is a precise description of what’s the case, it is our general condition. Yet, despite all the flexibility and ever-changing styles and modes of production, what lacks is the collective design of a subjectivity that would overcome

permanent insecurity. What type of figure could replace and supersede San Precario? We need to move on and define the post-precarious situation, jump over our shadows, and start from there.

**SOCIALISM NEVER TOOK ROOT IN AMERICA  
BECAUSE THE POOR SEE THEMSELVES NOT  
AS AN EXPLOITED PROLETARIAT BUT AS  
TEMPORARILY EMBARRASSED MILLIONAIRES.**

**John Steinbeck  
(Ronald Wright's paraphrase)**



## ORIGIN STORY

Let me start with a brief confession. A few years ago, for reasons concerning the apartments I lived in more than my own achievements, I was interviewed for one of Italy's major national newspapers. During the interview, the purpose of which was to produce a collective portrait of cosmopolitan youth, I spoke of my life as a student in various European cities. I enthused about the doctoral research I was doing and did not hide the difficulty of finding work in my own country. A few days later I happened across the newspaper. I searched through the various interviews, each headed by an icon reflecting the degree of satisfaction of the interviewees, until I found mine: a sad face accompanied the title "What happened to our dreams?". To my astonishment, I, who considered myself somehow in control of my own destiny, had been reduced to a victim, a mere statistical fact, a generational cliché: I had been *outed* as a precarious worker. So, instead of doing what I would normally do (feeding my ego by posting the article everywhere I could on social media), I did nothing.

And yet, as I realised later, that portrait was not so far from reality. After all, I had actually sent dozens of CVs around and at the time I was living on a not very substantial scholarship that was soon to run out. Before long I would have to start once again the tedious process of public relations, applications, portfolio, LinkedIn — a few years older and a little less energetic. Would I still be capable of promoting my own *personal brand*? The light cast by the article certainly wouldn't help me. According to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, "[t]oday, we do not deem ourselves subjugated *subjects*, but rather *projects*: always refashioning and reinventing ourselves". The article had identified me, perhaps for

the first time, as a subjugated individual rather than an autonomous project in progress, or at least not only as that. Truth aside, which image was it better to adopt? The precarious or the entrepreneurial one? An image that admits uncertainty and fears exhaustion, or one that merely celebrates free enterprise and individual determination? And what if the seemingly opposing images were instead two sides of the same perverse coin? We'll call this coin: *entreprenariat*. Now it is perhaps easier to *come out*, that is, to publicly come to terms with one's own status. But first we need to take a good look at the relationship between entrepreneurial resolve and precarious hesitation. That's what I aim to do in this book.

Mixing entrepreneurship with precariat,<sup>1</sup> *entreprenariat* is a neologism that aptly defines the reality that surrounds me (and therefore represents me): a play on words that becomes a tweet that becomes a blog that becomes a book.<sup>2</sup> Giving value to even the tiniest idea: isn't this part of the entrepreneurial imperative that the *entreprenariat* describes and prescribes? Some theorists suggest reclaiming entrepreneurship, highlighting the cooperative effort on which it is based rather than the heroic individualism to which it is generally associated. This book, while sharing this intent, remains an individual project (however individual any expression of thought may be). This means that I take full responsibility for the ambiguities and limits it contains; but it also means that the *entreprenariat* dictates do not concern

1 The word 'precariat' is itself a portmanteau that combines precariousness and proletariat.

2 I found that the term 'entreprenariat' was also employed by Ph.D. candidate Jason Netherton in a peculiar workshop given in 2016 and entitled "The Entreprenariat: Recording Artists in Extreme Metal Music Proto-Markets". Unfortunately, I wasn't able to obtain much information about it besides the abstract (<http://www.events.westernu.ca/events/fims/2016-11/the-entreprenariat-at-recording.html>).

everyone in the same way. Therefore, rather than making it a universal category and risking “taking a holiday in someone else’s misery”, I have tried to identify the relationships between entrepreneurship and precarity in contexts that are in some way related to me. Although, as sociologist Ulrich Bröckling claims, in the informal economies of some regions of Africa, Latin America and Asia, dedicating oneself to entrepreneurial activity in the broad sense is often the only way to survive.

This book is about entrepreneurs. But it is not the typical hagiography of visionaries like Steve Jobs or self-made men (alleged or otherwise) like Elon Musk. Nor is it a self-help manual. No, this book describes the sources of compulsions and inhibitions of the so-called microentrepreneurs: students, freelancers, the unemployed (and sometimes even employees) forced to develop an entrepreneurial mindset in order not to succumb to the growing precariousness that involves both the economic and existential sphere. Welcome to the *entreprenariat*, where the entrepreneurial spirit is a curse rather than a blessing.

This book investigates the effects of a mutation that went hand in hand with the eulogy of first creativity and then innovation ratified by policy makers: entrepreneurship, a mindset originating from a specific practice, has turned into *entrepreneurialism*, a widespread system of values so deeply rooted as to be imperceptible. Occupying a level of what Mark Fisher has defined as “capitalist realism” is entrepreneurial naturalism: enterprise as an innate human quality. Meanwhile, precarity has become the norm for a substantial section of the population, settling on the existing like a physical agent in the atmosphere. The result is a common feeling based either on fear or blind enthusiasm: the inability to fully

determine what's next radicalises the experience of the present. The future is Medusa-like: in order not to turn to stone, we must put ourselves on the line and relentlessly make new personal investment. We can't look at the future in its eyes and yet we can't ignore it, so we must only deduce it from our short-term present. We must innovate ourselves. When idleness is denied, risk-taking becomes unavoidable.

Entrepreneur or precarious worker? These are the terms of the cognitive dissonance experienced by new workers (not exclusively those whose work is predominantly cognitive), immersed as they are in a sort of collective hypnosis that turns existence into a shaky project in perennial start-up phase. Within this setting it is time itself that implodes, as the increasingly detailed measurement of an abstract concept of productivity marks the fragmented periods of self-employment, offering us a fleeting impression of control. While the informal spaces of nomadic work (airports, stations, bars, kitchens and bedrooms) transform the city into a permanent office, the actual workplace becomes a playground for eternal college students. The pressure of the entreprecariat does not just demand the constant upgrade of traditional professional skills, but it invades the realm of character, making good humour, optimism and cordiality a competitive advantage to cultivate through meditative practices and behavioural psychology in the form of mobile apps.

The internet doesn't help, as we discover exploring a series of digital platforms that incorporate entrepreneurial dynamics while taking advantage of widespread precariousness: from social networks like LinkedIn, which make a feature out of competitiveness and mimetic desire, to online marketplaces such as Fiverr, which mediate freelance work around the globe — Berlin or Banga-

lore, it makes no difference — to sites like GoFundMe, which fundraise for emergency situations or conditions of hardship, ranging from an unpaid internship to cancer.

Is there no other choice then but to resign oneself to such a life in *permanent beta*? Or, on the contrary, is it possible to reject the entrepreneurial gospel by reclaiming the demands raised by the precarious viewpoint? Do art and irony serve any purpose? While expressing some reserve about these instruments, the book does suggest some possible ways of achieving this enterprise. Trying to avoid both victimhood and euphoria, borrowing the language of branding and subverting the stereotypical registers of entrepreneurship (such as the motivational industry and the managerial jargon, within an *in vitro* representation of the ideal office), *Entreprenariat* is the mirror of a society in which everyone is an entrepreneur and nobody is safe.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I decided to maintain most references applicable to the Italian situation included in the original edition of the book. This is to show that entrepreneurialism is not only a doctrine embraced by US and UK business schools, but a 'common sense' that amalgamates with local beliefs. After the initial publication I had the chance to expand my research on the subject while further reflecting on it. Traces of this activity can be found mostly in the footnotes, which can be interpreted as *a posteriori* ruminations on the original content.

# I.

# core values

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***DESTRUCTION.***

**TRY SWALLOWING THAT WORD.**

**SEE HOW IT TASTES. IT WON'T DIGEST**

**COMFORTABLY. NOT AT FIRST.**

**BUT DIGEST IT YOU MUST, BECAUSE**

**DESTRUCTION IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY.**

**Tom Peters**

What do TV star Oprah Winfrey, automobile pioneer Henry Ford, fashion icon Coco Chanel, journalism mogul Arianna Huffington and the current US president Donald Trump have in common? Wealth and success — you will say. Of course, but also the fact that they are entrepreneurs: very different activities, a single label. Is it possible to identify the specificity of entrepreneurship or does it tautologically coincide with doing business? According to Peter Thiel, controversial co-founder of PayPal and supporter of Trump in the last elections, teaching someone entrepreneurship is something of a paradox. Seeing as how behaving as an entrepreneur means wandering from the beaten track, providing a replicable business formula must be a contradiction. Can we legitimately consider entrepreneurship to be a discipline then? From this very question a whole field of study has emerged. Starting as a branch of economics, it has developed through management studies, to incorporate some rudiments of psychology and sociology. Meanwhile, a rhetorical regime that considers entrepreneurship a way of life and entrepreneurialism a way of being has become widespread. To add to the idea that free enterprise is more than just simply creating and managing a company, there is an academic branch, on the whole critical, that develops the Foucaultian perspective towards the *homo oeconomicus*.<sup>1</sup> However much we may dispute the analysis of Michel Foucault, it has to be admitted that some of the terms he used proved prophetic.<sup>2</sup>

1 See in particular *The Entrepreneurial Self*, an in-depth analysis in which German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling investigates the genealogy of the entrepreneur, the 'force field' in which they move, and the strategies and programmes they are required to adopt.

2 During his lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault coined the formu-

## Triumph of the Nerds

Silicon Valley and its founding myths have played a key role in making entrepreneurship what it is today. In the beginning was Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, both rebels in their own way, the first against the corporate culture of IBM and the second, ironically, against that of Windows. Gates the businessman, Jobs the artist. If Bill Gates still adheres to the typical characteristics of a white collar worker (he literally wears a shirt and tie), Steve Jobs, portrayed by National Geographic in 1981 riding his BMW R60/2, channeled the counter-cultural and psychedelic flame of the West Coast into an exceptional business vision and obsessive attention to design. An unlikely mix that gelled forever in the “Stay hungry, Stay foolish” motto, pronounced by a Steve Jobs already undergoing canonisation during his commencement speech at Stanford in 2005. Wrongly attributed to the head of Apple, the quote appeared in the last issue of Stewart Brand’s Whole Earth Catalog, a magazine that combined a passion for tools and a vocation for communal life. Today it is not uncommon to see tattoos of the slogan, perhaps alongside one of a half-eaten apple.

While Jobs and Gates might occupy the most prestigious positions in the techno-entrepreneurial Olympus, they are certainly not its only inhabitants and, as with mythology, each entrepreneur seems to personify a specific character trait. There’s Jeff Bezos, whose paroxysms of laughter betray an overwhelming optimism; Jack Ma, co-founder of Alibaba, who plays a Taiji master in a Jet Li movie; Google’s enigmatic Brin-Page duo and Twitter’s eccentric Ev Williams, the ‘reptilian’ Mark Zuckerberg, and so on. Female entrepreneurs, at least

la “entrepreneur of the self”, which is close to the Italian *imprenditore presso me stesso* (entrepreneur at myself), often used as a job description on social media.



at these levels, remain thin on the ground as yet. We also come across a series of minor deities such as Tony Hsieh, creator of Zappos, who converted the happiness of both client and employee into an economic asset, radicalising the concept of company culture with Nerf gun battles.<sup>3</sup> Finally, descending into the underworld, we come up against discredited figures such as the ruthless Travis Kalanick, former CEO of Uber, who made competitive brutality something to boast about. Angel investors watch patiently over this micro-universe, and from a secluded position set their own terms.<sup>4</sup>

Successful entrepreneurs, especially in the field of technology, have now become stars, on a par with those found in the movie and music industries. We yearn to emulate their character and habits, taking note of their weekly diet and the hours of sleep they allow themselves (and this does not only apply to adults, as demonstrated by the launch of Teen Boss, a magazine for teenage girl entrepreneurs<sup>5</sup>). Quora.com hosts endless discussions about the main merits of these entrepreneurial rock stars and ways to copy their colossal success. Among the questions a user, himself an entrepreneur, asks: "Where would you rate Steve Jobs on a

3 A 2012 video that shows a 'shoot-out' on the company premises: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaueblBFowU>.

4 At the time of writing, the Silicon sky seems to be about to fall. The public is becoming increasingly wary of the bombastic statements of hi-tech entrepreneurs and of the power their companies exert. However, this doesn't coincide with an instantaneous myth-unmaking: techno-entrepreneurial divinities are still worshipped.

5 Here is how Brittany Galla, head of Bauer Media teen division, describes the way Teen Boss was brought to life: "We arranged a lot of focus groups... We really learned that these kids are really watching *Shark Tank*, they really have Shark Tank hour at school, there's even Shark Tank class at school." The magazine closed operations in 2018, about a year and a half after its first issue, as Liz Pelly explains in a critical article on The Baffler.

scale of 1 to 10 as one of the greatest human beings of all time?” Steve Jobs et al. represent the promise of an escape from the dullness of the Organization, from bureau-capitalist tedium. From the point of view of hopeful emulators, their economic fortunes and misfortunes are less relevant than the autonomy they obtained. In his book *In Defence of Serendipity* Amsterdam-based author Sebastian Olma elucidates this: “Encouraged not least by the mystical success stories of Silicon Valleys, Alleys, and Roundabouts, turning yourself into a start-up seemed to provide an emancipative alternative to the creativity-stifling, hierarchical structures of old-capitalism”.

Adulation of entrepreneurs affects Italy as well, albeit in a peculiar way — and I am not referring just to the case of Silvio Berlusconi. While nostalgically commemorating the human face of big business in the person of Adriano Olivetti (who was the enlightened leader of Olivetti, the company famous for its typewriters and early computers, and whose life story was the focus of a celebratory series for the state TV), Italians periodically condemn the shamelessly flaunted riches of Flavio Briatore (the business magnate playing the part of “the boss” in the Italian edition of *The Apprentice*). Many listen to the parables of Marco ‘Monty’ Montemagno, populariser of new business philosophies and the exploits of those who apply them, while local startupper learned the ropes on *CheFuturo!*, an online magazine with an almost propagandistic slant on the topic of innovation, created and run by Riccardo Luna from 2012 to 2017 — the very same Riccardo Luna who recently made public the depressing state of Italian startups. Recommending pragmatism is, again, Briatore, who claimed, well before it became the general consensus, that in Italy it is better to open a pizzeria than to launch a start-up.

One thing is certain: free enterprise has profoundly affected the contemporary collective imagination. But why? It may be an extension of the fetish for products or services such as Apple or Amazon provide, or a collective lust for profit, or even a vicious circle in which entrepreneurship is a value in itself and therefore those who embody it become reference points. Certainly a key role is played by the fact that some of the aforementioned Ur-entrepreneurs have enormous media influence: Jeff Bezos owns the *Washington Post*, while Mark Zuckerberg is often accused of not taking responsibility for what can in fact be considered the world's largest publishing company: Facebook. And then there are the entrepreneurial reality shows like the British Dragons' Den (created in 2005 and based on the cruel Japanese original, *Tigers of Money*), *The Apprentice* (the show that launched Donald Trump in 2004), *Shark Tank* and, last in order of appearance, Apple's *Planet of the Apps*. However, in these shows, which nevertheless are a striking example of what sociologists Federico Chicchi and Anna Simone define as "performative pedagogy", we discover that, far from being free spirits fired up by entrepreneurial zeal, participants are often hesitant or even fragile individuals who choose to suffer the sadistic harassment of those really calling the shots: the investors. If we look more closely, we realise that the entrepreneurial mentality has its blind spot: survivorship bias. The tendency of which is to focus optimistically on the successes while ignoring the failures, although these are more frequent and therefore statistically more relevant.

## **Unternehmergeist**

How does free enterprise become a value for those who are not strictly speaking entrepreneurs and do not aspire to become one? In other words, how does entre-

preneurship become *entrepreneurialism*? In short, how did the “entrepreneurial spirit” come about? The term (in German, *Unternehmergeist*) was coined by Viennese economist Joseph Schumpeter, known to non-experts for a vision of the world whereby what brings about advancement is not progressive optimisation, but what he called “creative destruction”, whose continuous turmoil catalyses innovation. In the original edition of *The Theory of Economic Development*, published in 1911, Schumpeter affords a privileged role to the entrepreneur, a figure hitherto largely ignored on a theoretical level. To the young economist, 28 at the time, entrepreneurs occupied a privileged position in a society he saw as rigidly pyramidal. At the base we find a hedonistic mass of individuals too busy making a living (“They simply do not want to perish”) to be able to spend time inventing. On the next step up we find a minority endowed with a more acute intelligence and imagination that allows them to devise new combinations of materials, goods and services. Finally, at the top of the pyramid is a very small group of “men of action”, not necessarily geniuses but able to innovate, or translate their own inventions and those of others into social realities. In other words, a group of men able to “subjugate others and to utilise them for [their] purposes”.

According to Schumpeter, what characterises the entrepreneur is *his* mindset, the courage to face risk fearlessly and the consequent ability to “rise above the crowd”, thus exerting political, social and cultural influence. “The features of his way of life gain some sort of universality”, writes Schumpeter, according to whom “[the entrepreneur] emanates not only an economic but also a social process of reorganisation”. Paradoxically, what makes the entrepreneur *sui generis* also makes him a general

model.<sup>6</sup> However, since the entrepreneur's key *medium* is personality, entrepreneurship is not something that is inherited. Schumpeter will later moderate his point of view, remaining however firm on the fact that entrepreneurial activity is the pivot of capitalist societies and that the entrepreneur belongs to a rare species. He will also anticipate the future decline of the figure due to automation, eventually rejecting his aura of heroism due to his subordination to banks and financiers.

## The Entrepreneurial Society

Among the many followers of Schumpeter some have focused particularly on the role of entrepreneurship. Writing in the mid-80s, Peter Drucker, a well known management guru, identified a metamorphosis in the US economy. This went from a managerial dimension made up of large corporations to an entrepreneurial one, made up of small and medium-sized enterprises. Drucker fully embraces the Schumpeterian idea that change is natural and even healthy for the economy. Change is so fundamental to Drucker that he places it at the centre of his definition of an entrepreneur, replacing it with the usual component of risk: "the entrepreneur always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity".<sup>7</sup> Drucker goes so far as to present the en-

6 The generalisation of the vocation of the entrepreneur can also be found in Max Weber's analysis of early capitalism. The vocation (*Beruf*) initially developed by a few ascetic entrepreneurs becomes a matter of adaptation for the rest of society: "Whoever does not adapt his manner of life to the conditions of capitalistic success must go under, or at least cannot rise".

7 Ever since the word entrepreneur has been used, the notion of risk was involved. Richard Cantillon, the first economist to use the term (translated as 'undertaker') in his *Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en Général* (1755), defined the entrepreneur as a self-employed risk-taker who purchases goods at a certain price and sells them later at an uncertain price (contrary to fixed income wage-earners). Through the decades, theorists have indicated several qualities that are at the core of the archetype of the entrepreneur. For instance, Israel Kirzner suggested that the fundamental quality of the entrepreneur is alert-

trepreneur as a dissident, a figure who “upsets and disorganises”. And this upheaval, which may at first glance appear risky, is in the long run and on a large scale less risky than merely keeping the status quo. The management expert does not focus on the temperament or the character of entrepreneurs, too varied according to him, but on their behaviour. For Drucker, entrepreneurship is a practice that through a process of codification can become a discipline concerning private companies, public organisations and individuals. It is therefore possible to systematise it and direct it towards what is true innovation. Favouring free enterprise in a specific context are factors that generally lie outside economic analysis, such as education, changes in value systems, etc. And as entrepreneurship lies outside non-specific economic analysis, so do its applications: indeed it “pertains to all activities of human beings other than those one might term ‘existential’ rather than social”.

However for Drucker the emergence of an entrepreneurial economy is not enough, the real goal is to found an entrepreneurial *society*. In this perspective, the welfare state is an impediment and revolutions are a naive illusion. And so Drucker focuses, almost contemptuously, on “redundant workers”: a class that has had no reason to evolve since its bargaining power has enabled it to obtain ‘astronomical’ earnings. In Drucker’s view, salaried workers are unable to respond independently to the need to be flexible and engage with lifelong learning. They represent “a purely negative force” that limits progress to the same extent as government institutions that slow down private companies with their bureaucracy.

ness. These qualities are strictly related to the function that the entrepreneur is meant to perform in the economy and society. In *The Entrepreneurial Self*, Ulrich Bröckling provides a detailed analysis of the entrepreneur’s four functions: speculation, innovation, risk bearing, coordination.

It is therefore necessary “to encourage habits of flexibility, of continuous learning, and of acceptance of change as normal and as opportunity — for institutions as well as for individuals.” From this point of view, constant updating, what Bröckling calls “permanent reform or revolution”, becomes the responsibility of the individual, or of the individual organisation, just as it is for the private enterprise.

## **The Entrepreneurial Mind**

To understand how an entrepreneur *functions* let's immerse ourselves in what is considered by the Wall Street Journal to be a classic. Published for the first time in 1977 and on its fourth edition by 1994, *New Venture Creation* sets out to analyse the strategies of today's successful entrepreneurs and train those of tomorrow. The author is Jeffry Timmons, a former lecturer at the prestigious Harvard Business School and apparently the first to use the term ‘entrepreneurial’ in the title of a thesis. In 1994, at the dawn of the dot.com boom, Timmons spoke of the emergence of entrepreneurial awareness as a revolution, at first silent and then clear to everyone, comparable to the Second Industrial Revolution. According to Timmons, the vocation of the entrepreneur goes hand in hand with the American dream as it allows for the realisation of the main aspiration of US citizens, the “cultural imperative” to work on their own.<sup>8</sup> Timmons believes that the self-employed are happy, gratified by their work and satisfied with their financial rewards. In support of this thesis, the academic presents a series of interviews with a particularly representative sample of the United States and the

<sup>8</sup> Before him, in 1985, the President of the United States himself, Ronald Reagan, had associated the entrepreneurial vocation with the spirit of the nation, declaring that “to be enterprising is not uniquely American, but entrepreneurialism seems to be found more in the nature of our people than just about anywhere else”.

whole world... the students of Harvard.<sup>9</sup> If once the aversion towards salaried work was confirmed through absenteeism and rejection, Timmons offers a diametrically opposite alternative: to become one's own boss.

Timmons provides a surprisingly vague definition of entrepreneurship: the “act of creating and building something of value practically from nothing”. This is why entrepreneurship is a profoundly creative, if not even artistic activity, that requires passion, commitment and motivation. And, last but not least, the willingness to risk both personally and financially, albeit in a calculated manner. It is no coincidence that the entrepreneur is as creative as an inventor, but also has the skills of a manager. Entrepreneurs are like Olympic decathletes or skilled surgeons: they go as fast as downhill skiers, and like them they are always on the brink of disaster. Like musical conductors, they tune and coordinate, despite the stress. And this is why failure is the rule for them rather than the exception. But there is no need to worry, because it is businesses that fail, not the entrepreneurs; indeed, failure is the perfect training for them. But how does an entrepreneur think and act? Timmons offers us a highly idealised cross-section (based on the statements of a small group of highly respected entrepreneurs) of what he calls an “entrepreneurial mind”:

Successful entrepreneurs share common attitudes and behaviors. They work hard and are driven by an intense commitment and determined

<sup>9</sup> Timmons's methodology might reflect a more systemic problem concerning the field of economics as a whole. As anthropologist David Graeber puts it, “[economics] came into existence [...] because people with money want to know what other people with money are likely to do [...] That is to say, economic science is mainly concerned with the behavior of people who have some familiarity with economics — either ones who have studied it or at the very least are acting within institutions that have been entirely shaped by it.”



perseverance; they see the cup half full, rather than half empty; they strive for integrity; they burn with the competitive desire to excel and win; they are dissatisfied with the status quo and seek opportunities to improve almost any situation they encounter; they use failure as a tool for learning and eschew perfection in favor of effectiveness; and they believe they can personally make an enormous difference in the final outcome of their ventures and their lives.

### **Entrepreneurial Naturalism**

Entrepreneurship: sense or sensibility? If on the one hand the entrepreneurial attitude aims to rationalise all activities, emotions and relationships (Jeff Bezos claims his decision to abandon a shining career in finance to create Amazon was dictated by a “regret minimization framework”), on the other hand it betrays a passionate dimension that makes someone’s *disposition* a key element of success. Silicon Valley insider journalist Sarah Lacy says entrepreneurs are optimistic by nature. Taken to its extreme consequences, optimism becomes what Mark Fisher, after David Smail, calls “magical voluntarism”, which is the idea you just need to crave something enough for it to happen. And who needs to channel their own will more than entrepreneurs, immersed as they are in the uncertainty of a continuous and natural change? The Dionysian thus becomes a complement to the Apollonian, the irrational is rationalised in order to create a formula that can be repeated.

When entrepreneurship becomes entrepreneurialism, it acquires psychological or even pathological qualities, as evidenced in the professional autobiography of Andrew Grove, former president of Intel, entitled *Only Paranoids Survive*. The magnate Warren Buffett has often

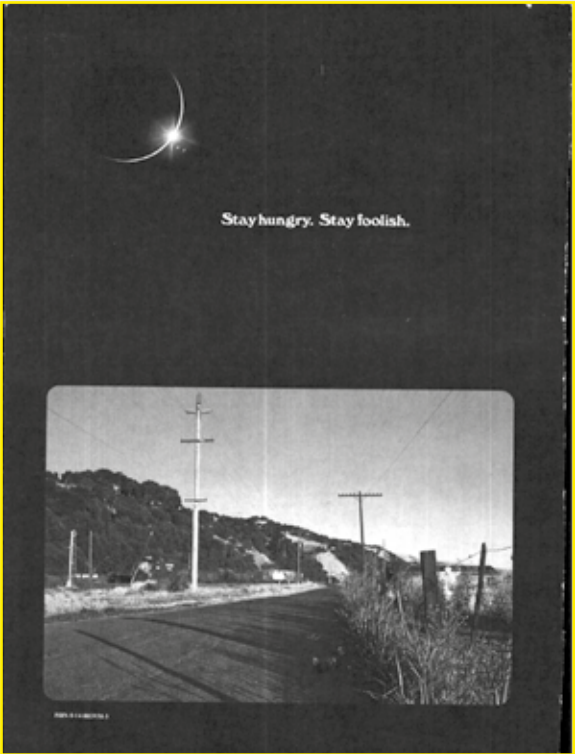
defined himself as winner of the Ovarian Lottery, or alternatively as a member of the Lucky Sperm Club. But this is not enough: the idea of an entrepreneurial gene is widespread, expressed for example in the aforementioned Teen Boss magazine. Some even suggest a Lombrosian-type of entrepreneur phrenology, wherein the main section of the skull reveals the “ability to create one’s own reality”. A specific practice sublimates, a trade turns into common sense and sometimes even into a legendary state of nature. The Bengali social entrepreneur Muhammad Yunus, a pioneer of microcredit and a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, is widely quoted as having claimed that “all human beings are entrepreneurs. When we were in the caves, we were all self-employed... finding our food, feeding ourselves. That’s where human history began. As civilization came, we suppressed it. We became ‘labor’ because they stamped us, ‘You are labor.’ We forgot that we are entrepreneurs.”

### **A Matter of Common Sense**

Be Like Bill is a so-called exploitable that appeared around 2015, a meme that can be customised according to its internal logic. Bill is a little stick figure that represents an everyman who makes wise choices based on his common sense. If he comes across something that offends him on the internet, Bill simply ignores it and goes on. “Bill is smart. Be like Bill”, the meme advises. Sometime later The Mind Unleashed, a “conscious media gathering” organisation with more than eight million followers, produced a version with a new protagonist. Bill becomes Elon. Elon Musk, of course, an honorary citizen of the techno-entrepreneurial Olympus. The parable of the entrepreneur is based on will: Elon wanted a new payment system and created PayPal; he wanted to drive an electric car and founded Tesla; he wanted low-cost space travel and created SpaceX; he wanted faster

means of transport and is currently developing Hyperloop. Elon is not constantly complaining about how bad the world is. Elon works to change it.

At this point we can trace a provisional genealogy of the role of the entrepreneur and their attitude over a century: the exceptional individual who, according to the young Schumpeter, rises from the crowd, and multiplies — as Peter Drucker explains — to become a whole society of dissidents who benefit from a constantly changing scene and exercise their autonomy, thus embodying, according to Jeffry Timmons, the American dream of freedom and independence in the form of self-employment. Then their gaze turns to the past, to the origins of their species; that is when they finally realise, to quote Muhammad Yunus, that they have always been entrepreneurs, except during that historical interlude that goes by the name of civilisation. And this is how will prevails over history.



*Whole Earth Catalog*, published by Stewart Brand. The motto “Stay hungry. Stay foolish” appears on the back cover of the last issue.



Nerf gun, a symbol of corporate culture in the hi-tech world. A culture that encourages informality and fun, as promoted by Zappos founder Tony Hsieh.



Cover of Teen Boss magazine.

## A parasite found in cat poop has been linked to a higher likelihood of entrepreneurial behavior in people who get infected

Peter Koticki Jul 25, 2018, 5:04 PM



Shutterstock

In 2018, this news made the rounds. According to a group of researchers, people infected with *Toxoplasma gondii* are more likely to start their own business or major in it. Stefanie Johnson, lead author of the paper, declared: “New ventures have high failure rates, so a fear of failure is quite rational. *T.gondii* might just reduce that rational fear.” It’s somehow ironic that the independence typical to the entrepreneur is here fostered by an alien entity that influences the host.

What do we talk about when we talk about precarity? Providing a single answer is impossible and probably counterproductive as it would involve an inevitable oversimplification. What is more, the literature is vast and derives from widely varying contexts. The issue of precarity touches Italy and France, as well as the United States, Venezuela and Japan. People fight under the banner of the precariat in Finland, Spain and the United Kingdom. Journalists and academics speak of precariousness, just as do politicians, workers and students. Often the tone is one of grumbling, sometimes it is resentful, only rarely optimistic. The spectre of precariousness also haunts a series of generational labels: the US boomerang generation, the French Génération Tanguy, the Italian VAT population, the Airbnb generation,<sup>10</sup> NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), and finally the generic, although often disparaging, Millennials. A set of semantic classifications denoting uncertainty, disillusionment, future void, anxiety and discomfort.

Film directors have dealt with precarity from a sometimes explicitly critical viewpoint, as did Italian Paolo Virzì in *Your Whole Life Ahead of You*. This 2008 film is a disheartening portrait of a brilliant young graduate trapped in a dead-end job as a receptionist, hostage to the team building exercises on the agenda in an environment permeated by 'the new spirit of capitalism' — as sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello had named it a few years earlier. More often though the precarious condition remains in the shadows, emerging

<sup>10</sup> *Generazione affittacamere* in Italian, as Filippo Lubrano calls it on Linkiesta: a generation of people who inherited a house from their parents and derive a small income by renting it out.



only in the shape of a moral fairy tale made palatable by a happy ending that confirms the merits of an unshakable work ethic. This is what happens in Gabriele Muccino's 2006 *The Pursuit of Happyness*, inspired by the life of millionaire entrepreneur Chris Gardner. The film follows the adventures of an ambitious but penniless black man (played by Will Smith) who, despite having a son to support, a wife who leaves him and a rent he is unable to pay, manages to successfully carry out his internship (unpaid) in a prestigious financial advisory firm, beating the competition to finally get a much sought-after position as a broker on a permanent contract.

Although precarious work is now an all-too familiar concept all over the world, Italy has played a special role in establishing it as such. In the mid-2000s, EuroMayDay, an international event held to coincide with Labour Day, played a catalysing role. Reflected in popular culture (complete with proto-meme San Precario, patron saint of precarious workers), it led to a series of theoretical manifestos, such as the 2004 *Bio/Pop Manifesto of the Metroradical Precariat* and a monographic issue of the British magazine *Mute*, on the cover of which was a contemporary Virgin Mary nursing her baby while at work in a call centre. What allegory could be more effective for what is known as cognitive precarity? Call centres say a lot about how work has changed in the last few decades, with their low-cost temporary work initially carried out within the borders of Italy and then partially relocated to Eastern Europe. Even today call centres offer a temporary outlet for those who go abroad to study, or are simply in search of their own fortune. Although they're still with us, new symbols of precarity are emerging powerfully. Just think of food delivery riders, part of the wider purgatory known as the gig economy, who, equipped with high-vis jackets and branded bags, speed across

the city like the new sandwich men. Compared to that of the receptionist, precarious workers in the gig economy have fewer apparent constraints and more flexibility: there is no apparent real-life boss to monitor the work, given that the checking systems are all on the smart-phone. No formal space is shared with colleagues and relationships are mainly with an abstract entity.

## **Precarious Trajectories**

At first sight, precariousness seems to be nothing new. As architect Francesco Marullo points out, Max Weber was already using the term *prekär* in 1918 to indicate the conditions of young German researchers at the mercy of free labour, before they were able to land a paid job. Weber considered it to be positive given that it guaranteed a high turnover and greater dynamism in knowledge production. What has changed today? What is strictly understood as work — with its set of relationships, conditions and constraints — tends to evaporate when it becomes the ambience of our lives. However this is not all there is to precarity. It is therefore necessary to build a further interpretation that includes the existential dimension and the discourse taking place in the public sphere. The precarity issue involves media narratives, advertising, marketing and interactions mediated by digital platforms, as well as their effects on personality and social relationships. If, as we have seen, entrepreneurship is something more than a job, so precarity, even when rooted in working relationships, involves multiple aspects of living. What follows is therefore an attempt to outline an inevitably non-exhaustive map of the wide-ranging considerations on precarity, seeking out the work of authors who do not always make explicit reference to it. The aim is to circumscribe the precarity issue by examining its various qualities. Can we speak of precarity as an experienced process

or an acquired status? Does precarity indicate a class, a generation or a mere state of affairs? To what extent is one precarious? And how does the precariat internally deal with competition to escape the fate predetermined by its name? Finally, can the precariat forge the tools for its own collective emancipation?

However, before going into a detailed examination of precarity, it is worth mentioning Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's definition, which has the advantage of not being intrinsically connected to work. For Berardi, "[p]recarious is [sic] person who is able to know nothing about one's own future and therefore is hung by the present and praises God to be rescued from the earthly hell (the term precarity derives from praying)". When he does go into the specifics of work, however, Bifo highlights a paradox: the erosion of the constraints of work dependence certainly does not create autonomy, but in fact a more subtle and anxious form of subjugation — an originally marginal condition, which is gradually affecting an increasingly large part of the population. In addition to this definition, Berardi coined the term "cognitariat": if the proletariat's only property was their offspring, for the cognitariat it becomes the totality of their own cognitive faculties, expressed through language and creativity. Cognitarians are alienated from their main product, language, and from their peers, due to de-territorialisation and discontinuities that prevent them from implementing permanent forms of social organisation. What cognitarians experience is more than a temporary phase, as precarity — Bifo tells us — is the name of the era that follows modernity.

Another line of thought relating to precarity is rooted in the work of Judith Butler, an American philosopher who sees *precariousness* as inherent to human life.

Butler claims that since existence itself is precarious, this ontological characteristic should be a starting point for a way of life that rejects individualistic autonomy and adopts interdependence. Isabell Lorey, a political theorist based in Berlin, uses Judith Butler's ideas to define "three dimensions of the precarious": a level (*precarity*) constituted by the various political, social and legal responses to the first is superimposed on the previously mentioned *ontological precariousness*. Finally, there is the dimension of *governmental precarisation*, that is, the relationship between the dynamics of precarisation, government and self-government. Lorey stresses the fact that nowadays governmentality takes place *through* the precarious, and not against it. In her *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing takes up the theme of existential precariousness suggesting that precarity, rather than being an exception, represents the norm for our times and defines it as "the condition of being vulnerable to others".

## **The End of Life Narratives**

Published in 1998, Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character* offers a good insight into the effects of the new working conditions, and, consequently the new social ones, on personality. The American sociologist's analysis is based on a clear historical division marked by the introduction of flexibility. Although flexibility lies at the core of Sennett's focus, the detrimental effect on personality implicit in the title offers an answer to the issues flexible work raises. Flexibility acts primarily on *character*, understood as "the ethical value we place on our own desires and on our relations to others". Sennett believes character to be a broader category than personality because it is not limited to the individual sphere but involves social relationships and behaviour: it's a

*conduct*. The short and exceptional era of pre-flexibility Sennett identifies punctuates a history of crises. During the relative well-being of the economic boom that took place in various Western countries, it was legitimate to imagine life and career as linear progressions made up of cumulative results, an idea that reflected the economic growth and advancing technological progress. The routine and solid objectives of a perhaps monotonous, but also stable career provided the opportunity to interpret one's own existence as a road to be travelled, a *career* in the original sense. The advent of flexibility marked the collapse of these foundations and with them the loss of the value of experience (seniors are denigrated by juniors), of the clarity of authority and the visibility of power relationships.

To introduce his thesis, Sennett does not give us the story of a poor person, but the partially reworked tale of a successful consultant, son of an immigrant janitor. Father and son respectively represent a 'before' and an 'after'. Unlike the educated son, the various worries of the janitor do not include losing control of his own life, a fear that — states Sennett — is an essential part of the curriculum of contemporary workers. While work shatters into a series of 'projects', inner life floats adrift, since it is no longer guided by a clear ethical conduct. The same happens with social relations, continuously interrupted by frequent travel and job changes. Nowadays it is clear to everyone that the difficulty of creating a coherent life narrative in a society "composed of episodes and fragments" — a society in which the long term is an exception and the only constant is change — does not only regard wealthy consultants, but it brings together different social strata, even though they are affected in different ways. The challenge then becomes that of giving meaning to one's existence, which is less difficult

for those who identify fully with what they do, in spite of the material conditions in which they do it, or those who have a qualification recognised by their professional peers. In Sennett's view, the current generalised uncertainty differs from the past in that it does not derive from the awareness of a looming disaster.

To Sennett, there are two sides to change: if on the one hand it causes anxiety and fear, on the other it becomes a goal to pursue that acquires value in itself. It follows that a willingness to risk ends up coinciding with a sense of autonomy, because, as writer Erica Jong puts it, "the trouble is, if you don't risk anything, you risk even more". If not to risk is tantamount to failure, stability becomes a kind of "living death". But what does it mean to risk? It often means taking on types of structural difficulty as if they were the result of personal choices, thus transferring the responsibilities of institutions to individuals. Sennett does not limit his gaze to those subjected to change, but also examines those who approach change with confidence and enthusiasm. The sociologist encountered various specimens at the Swiss town of Davos, home to the World Economic Forum. Sennett sees the boss of Microsoft as a prime example of one who feeds on change (in 1998 at the peak of his entrepreneurial success and nowadays a much appreciated philanthropist). What distinguishes Bill Gates from his predecessors is a "tolerance for fragmentation". But not everyone has the same *resilience* as the techno-philanthropist and is therefore forced to develop different strategies to deal with a disorientation caused by the constant shuffling of the cards. Among these is irony: "An ironic view of oneself is the logical consequence of living in flexible time, without standards of authority and accountability", comments Sennett.

## **Alienation in the Making**

British economist Guy Standing, who worked for over thirty years at the International Labour Organization, claims that the precariat is not yet a class-for-itself, but a class-in-the-making, with its social risks, including the emergence of waves of hatred and violence and an escalation of the far right. For this reason, the precariat is a “dangerous” class, as suggested by the title of his principal contribution to the subject: *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Standing sees precarious work as “a distinctive bundle of insecurities” which, as Sennett also claims, directly bears the risks sustained in the past by the system. What characterises the precariat and the movements that identify with it is an ambivalence between a sense of penalisation and some sort of ‘heroism’. Precarious workers are divided between those who feel they’re a victim of a change to which they are subjected, and those who feel they are interpreting a cultural and institutional renewal moving in a different direction. In other words, in Standing’s view there are “groaners” who are allergic to precarity and “grinners” who go along with it cheerfully. Standing highlights the fact that in the public debate the sense of exploitation generally predominates, while only rarely does the emancipatory potential of precarity emerge. Added to this is the rather romantic image of a class that rejects bourgeois materialism and the tedium of the so-called soul-crushing job. The precariat is also diametrically opposed to the proletariat, in that it is characterised by an *informal* status:

Many entering the precariat would not know their employer or how many fellow employees they had or were likely to have in the future. They were also not ‘middle class’, as they did not have a stable or predictable salary or the status and benefits that middle-class people were supposed to possess.

But who are the precariat? To Standing, this class-in-the-making is populated both with adolescents and the elderly, migrants and single mothers. The wide range of groups is hardly surprising given that a quarter of the population, it seems, is precarious and the figures are on the rise. Guy Standing identifies seven socio-economic groups and places the precarious in between the *proficians* — recognised professionals who jump from one project to another without difficulty — and the unemployed. Given that as a rule precarious workers have no way of identifying themselves with their work, they experience a “status discord”, a contrast between an imagined status (perhaps in relation to their own family standards and educational level) and the real one, with a low income, instability and lack of professional recognition. An important distinction also emerges between job and professional role: it is not enough to guarantee temporary workers a permanent job unless the role is suited to their skills and ambitions. Role is crucial, since it goes beyond actual work: identity as a whole nowadays tends to coincide with one’s own training, and when this does not match one’s function at work there is a sense of *dysfunction*. Given that social and professional variables are dynamic, precarity can also be seen as a process:

To be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle.

On an emotional level, what characterises the precariat according to Standing are four A’s: anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation. The first two derive from a sense of individual and social insufficiency, particularly in view of the constant bombardment of signs of success online



and on tv. While anger and anomie are produced by social identification, it is uncertainty about the future that generates anxiety. Finally, alienation arises from the need to produce those signs of success and self-mastery that in turn generate more anger and anomie. In this vicious circle, precarity is seen as a fall. It is a movement that betrays the passivity of the individual. Precarity means *being moved* and therefore is synonymous with a loss of control. Given the circularity of these emotions, it is not surprising that the precariat is fighting itself by producing a self-image made up of opposing factions: the underemployed stigmatise the unemployed who in turn want to knock the former off their perch. Faced with the difficulty of constantly updating skills and undergoing new training, the precarious worker lives in a state of paralysis, exacerbated by the fact that their will and *willingness* has to be continually demonstrated. Thus the training itself (including education) starts to resemble something of a scam, given that, alone, it is not enough to keep the promises of professional fulfilment and relative well-being. To this, the educational institutions respond with the rhetoric of *employability*, claiming to offer the skills and aptitude necessary to find a job.<sup>11</sup>

### Expectations vs. Reality

In his *Teoria della classe disagiata*,<sup>12</sup> published in 2017, Raffaele Alberto Ventura rarely speaks of precarious

<sup>11</sup> This concept is reflected in various policies aimed at reforming education in Italy: from the recent implementation of the school-work alternation programme to the three skills Silvio Berlusconi based his 2001 electoral campaign on: 'English', 'internet', 'enterprise' (it was the three I's in Italian: *inglese, internet, impresa*).

<sup>12</sup> The title of Ventura's book refers to Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, published in 1899. According to Ventura, "conspicuous consumption", a defining feature of the economic relationships of a high-status class, can now be observed in other strata of the population. However, what is nowadays conspicuously consumed is positional and aspirational, given that it's not necessarily meant to maintain one's status but can also be an instrument to achieve such status.

workers in explicit terms, yet his work often returns to the existential malaise detected by Sennett. Furthermore, he takes a close look at Standing's status discord, which he terms as "class dysphoria". To use Standing's language, one could say that Ventura's aspirational class<sup>13</sup> is simply middle class precarity-in-the-making, seen however through the lens of positional strategies implemented by its own members and the institutions that represent them. These strategies are mostly counterproductive, doomed to failure, desperate even. Ventura positions the aspirational class in the final stage of the so-called 'opulent' societies, split between Keynesian nostalgia and threats of austerity: the stage of collapse. He shares some of the various characterisations of the precariat with the previous authors: besides the idea of anomie and malaise sparking resentment he, Like Standing, has a critical attitude towards education. Whereas Standing highlights how higher education in particular is no longer able to keep its promise of a job, Ventura sees it as a generator of dissatisfaction which, to paraphrase Ivan Illich, teaches people to "think rich and live poor" and produces a "fratricidal struggle" for the few places in the sun. *Prëkar* anyone?

Ambiguities similar to those of the precariat characterise the aspirational class. Ventura sometimes speaks of a generation, as a "class within a generation", or of a "large part of the middle class". Belonging to the middle class, as well as the ambition to be part of it, plays a decisive role in the processes of identifying the aspirational class. It certainly does not consider itself proletariat,

<sup>13</sup> 'Aspirational class' is also the phrasing adopted by Elizabeth Currid-Halkett in *The Sum of Small Things*. Currid-Halkett's main focus is the consumer habits of a new elite defined more by cultural capital than by income. According to the author, the consumption of this aspirational class is inconspicuous (organic food, yoga classes, podcasts, etc.), yet it produces general lifestyle shifts.

being “too wealthy to give up its aspirations, but too poor to be able to achieve them”. Indeed, aspirations that translate into “positional consumption” (whether it be a master’s degree in creative writing or an unpaid internship), feed the economic engine of the aspirational class. According to Ventura there is nothing fanciful in this, since the only way not to descend a few steps of the social ladder is to try to climb it. Positional consumption (consumption in that it produces costs) “serves to establish social roles and access to resources”. Giving up this kind of consumption means avoiding risk but, as we said earlier, this only actually increases said risk.

Unfortunately, however, the prestige afforded by such consumption is inherently relative, that is, it exists as a yardstick: one only needs to think of the social value of a degree today compared to fifty years ago. So what the aspirational class lives in is above all an “existential condition”, which is tantamount not to poverty, but to relative misery. Relative to what? To a planned, expected or simply imagined personal realisation. In this sense, the aspirational class contains features typical both of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Much like the former, it means to preserve its status and like the latter, it constantly feels threatened by Marx’s notorious reserve army. The aspirational class shares the same generalised conflict as the nineteenth-century romantic artist, whose ideals are in constant struggle with reality, understood here simply as economic reason. The aspirational class knows that “one does not speak of money” yet it is all too aware that, as Virginia Woolf said, “intellectual freedom depends upon material things”. While Ventura does prove sympathetic in some ways, he also launches a sharp attack, which is worth reading in full:

we see ourselves on the side of the oppressed,

but perhaps we are nothing but failed oppressors [...] It feels good to jump on the bandwagon of the defeated, the oppressed, and the exploited. It is convenient to proclaim oneself cognitive workers and to join the struggle of the international proletariat against capitalism. Anything, so as not to admit that it could be us at the front, among the ranks of the “enemies of the people”.

While living on the backs of the true victims of global capitalism, the aspirational class perpetuates its perverse game, facing a real “class euthanasia”, brought about in various ways. Some become proletarians, others prefer to pursue their career over reproducing, many emigrate and, finally, still others take their own lives. Is it best to decide collectively to give up individual dreams? This is not very likely, given that “in the hysteria of the middle class that is watching itself die, collective solutions do not seem feasible”. Among these, Ventura suggests in a whisper the possibility of defining “an exit strategy of self-representation”, refuting the socially constructed self-image in favour of reality, but only individually, because self-representation cannot be ruled by decree.

## **Damnation and Liberation**

After considering the work of authors who make reference to it in some way, it is now time to return to the origins of the precariat movement. We will therefore round off with *General Theory of the Precariat* by Alex Foti, one of the main activists in the ChainWorkers collective and a key organiser of EuroMayDay. Published in 2017, his essay traces the development of this parade, offering the diagnosis that precarity came about due to decades of neoliberal policies, and providing some political and cultural directions for the growth of the movement. According to Foti, the precariat is neither a class-in-the-

making nor the latest evolution of the working class nor even is it specific to recent generations, but instead it represents what work itself has become. Precarity is therefore a reality that is progressively extending to society as a whole. It is the times we live in that are precarious, poisoned by a seemingly chronic and permanent global economic crisis, a “great recession”.

If, as the author warns, “precariousness is the new reality”, who belongs to the precariat? Among its ranks are telephone operators, fast food workers, freelance programmers, supply teachers and so on. Although it is not a strictly generational problem, Foti sees young people as the vanguard of the precariat, as they make up the majority of it and are the only cohort able to come together under this flag. Thus creating value from their main assets of high cultural potential and relational capital. Foti sees the precariat as already in control of the new means of production: computers connected to the net. The precariat is indeed underpaid, under-employed and under-protected, but also over-educated and therefore over-exploited. Foti’s precariat is young, mainly urban and multicultural. It is divided into creative class, logistics workers, service class and unemployed; with some individuals often belonging to one or more of these categories.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the *temp* represents the precarious worker par excellence. Not even students are excluded: less a category protected from the gales of the world of work than potential members of the precariat (an Italian banner against school-work alternation

<sup>14</sup> ——— *Contra* Foti, cultural theorist Angela McRobbie disputes the assimilation of creative workers within the ranks of the precariat. Such association justifies a vain hope: the unification of a novel working class. Furthermore, it obscures the section of the population for which labour has always been precarious, such as catering work. Therefore, instead of precarisation, McRobbie speaks of a “middle-classification” of the creative workforce, as it internalises middle-class values such as professionalism and passion for the job.

read “exploited today, precarious tomorrow”). Finally, Foti divides workers according to the various degrees of intensity of precarity characterising their existence, with the highest being that suffered by migrants, and the lowest for workers blessed with a permanent contract.

The author is keen to point out (as does Ventura) that precarity does not necessarily mean poverty, although it is its main threat. And this is where the question of fear as an economic engine becomes central as the precarious are afraid of plummeting into a social abyss and, as a result, experience the sensation of falling that Standing describes. Foti’s precariat does not include, as other analysts claim, the workers exploited in the sweatshops of global semi-peripheries, but is instead rooted in the metropolises of the Global North with their high rate of infocapitalism. It is the precariat that lives in Bushwick in New York, Kreuzberg in Berlin, Isola in Milan... So we are not talking of 99% of the world population, but of 15-25%. To Standing’s seven-class division, Foti responds with a simpler one made up of four: the elite, the salariat, the precariat and the underclass. In view of the xenophobia of the two upper classes, Foti sees a possible alliance between precarious workers and the underclass. To Foti, it is certainly not the precariat that is fomenting right-wing populism (as Standing subtly claims), neither is it consumed by a kind of generalised ‘yearning resentment’ (as Ventura suggests). As evidence of this, Foti points to the resurgence of the left, as embodied by Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, which feeds on the enthusiasm of the Millennials. The sad passions belong rather to the salariat, who viscerally fear precariousness, unlike the precariat who knows no other way of life.

Yet even the precarious have something to complain about: Sennett’s flexibility becomes *flexploitation*, a

schizophrenic form of exploitation that makes individuals “quantum workers”, subject to an unpredictable combination of various levels of employment. It is a working condition that affects the existential dimension, populated by stress, anxiety and social exclusion. To heighten frustration, there is the awareness of being collectively indispensable but individually disposable. But for Foti there is a positive side: precarity may be damnation and exploitation, but it is also liberation. Of course, it deprives young workers of their rights, but at the same time it undermines a work ethic that has now become meaningless. Precarious workers seem therefore to be the only political subject able to stand up to the elites that brought about the 2008 crisis. While unions and political parties are heading towards oblivion, the precariat must make use of a populist policy based on the redistribution of wealth, multiculturalism and environmental ethics. Foti views the precariat as creating greater social worth because it is forging a new culture of protest, expressed through movements such as Black Lives Matter and Fight for \$15. Therefore, besides chronicling the emergence of precarious work and analysing its political and economic causes, *General Theory of the Precariat* is a call to arms, an invitation to form a global union, the Precariat Syndicate, of a populist, feminist and eco-social matrix. What is the recipe for improving the fate of the precariat? A 4-day working week, a universal basic income of at least \$1000 a month, a minimum wage of \$15 an hour and the immediate occupation of the city.

## **Navigating Disorientation**

At this point, it seems useful to reflect on the various stances on precarity so as to be able to compare and comment on them in greater detail. First of all we need to clarify what the precariat means in terms of compo-

sition. Alex Foti's classification, less ambiguous than Standing's, simplifies the task: the precarity dealt with here does not necessarily coincide with poverty and mainly involves urban areas, where the economics of services and logistics combine with those of knowledge and creativity. Precarity disproportionately involves the young because for them it represents the norm rather than an exception. Chicchi and Simone rightly pose a question that rhetorically reveals precarity as the young's new normal: "Are the latest generations [...] still willing to interpret and define their social condition on the basis of an idea of precarity mainly as mutilation and deprivation?". The purpose of this definition is not to exclude other segments of the population but to help make the precariat a category that can be analytically effective. Over-extension would empty it of meaning. Furthermore, the specific aim of this book is to examine the relationships between precarity and entrepreneurialism. Naturally, the entrepreneurial culture described earlier mainly relies on youth precarity: it is the young who find themselves faced with the (often only apparent) choice between a purgatory of temporary jobs and constructing their own professional independence. Furthermore, the very idea of youthfulness is mobilised by entrepreneurialism. We see that, for example, in the way working in the gig economy is promoted as an activity for young, dynamic people. However if, as Foti claims, the precariat is at odds with the salariat, the contrast is somewhat blurred: family ties, and therefore economic bonds, link the precariat to the salariat.

That said, it is worth underlining that the disruption caused by flexibility does not only involve a specific segment of the population. Sudden and constant change involves everyone, but only a few manage to ride the wave and indeed benefit from it. And this is perhaps



the only aspect that seems to remain unchanged. Precarity is the name we give to this kind of “changeless change”.<sup>15</sup> According to Sennett, the resulting fragmentation destabilises one’s self-image and limits its construction. Many simply ignore or even reject the circumstances that determine their own story. In doing so they often create an idealised personal narrative to the detriment of the material reality that lies behind it. In other words, they claim to be artists, journalists or entrepreneurs regardless of the income these activities actually generate. In this sense, the issue of precarity seems to be linked not only to work but also to the need to build and maintain one’s identity.

The misalignment between individual expectations and material reality (what we earlier called status imbalance and then class dysphoria) widens the gap between cooperation and competition. Internal struggles fomented by professional competition, social atomisation and artificial division into castes and subclasses prevent the precariat from becoming a cohesive movement. The precariat’s biggest problem, that of creating a ‘we’, clashes with the overwhelming entrepreneurial imperative to produce, affirm and manage a ‘me’. If, as Ventura maintains, the way to circumvent precarisation is to stand out, how can one hope to create lasting alliances and movements? Will it then be the task of the underclass alone, who have no hope of redemption in terms of job prestige, to bring about the revolution? All that remains is to make precarity something to be proud of, through a rejection of the tedium of work or as a perverse form of virtue signalling (the public display

<sup>15</sup> The expression (included in the endorsement for Nicole Aschoff’s *The New Prophets of Capital*) is by Naomi Klein, who defines changeless change as “the kind of innovation that simultaneously upends current practices and studiously protects existing wealth and power inequities”.

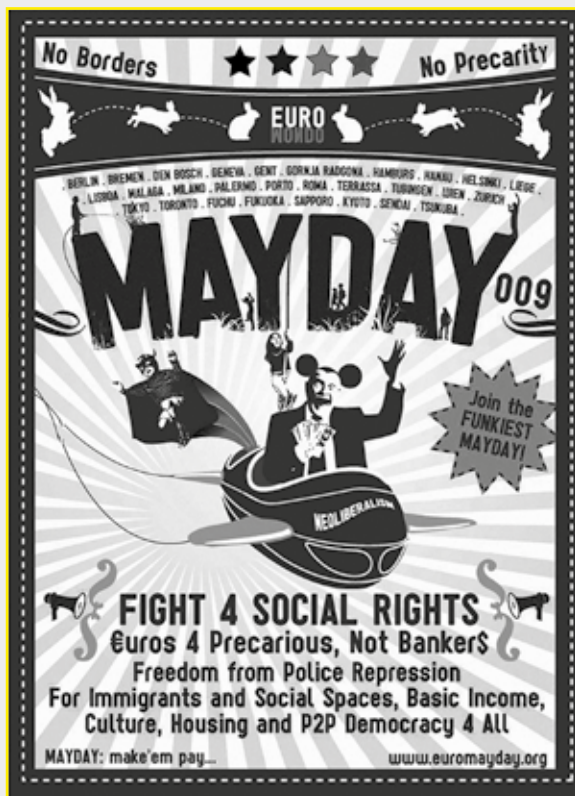
of one's social commitment). However, even in this case we are faced with a huge obstacle, and that is the sense of victimism that hovers over precarity. After the initial enthusiasm of EuroMayDay, the mediatic pity for the precariat conflicts with the accumulation of social and relational capital needed, ironically, to get out of precarity. It's not only "passionate work", to use Angela McRobbie's concept, that stifles precarious antagonism; it's the entrepreneurial imperative that bans it. The ambivalent status of the precariat makes it the perfect sacrifice, since it is a victim forced to deny being one.

Could it be culture that will unite the precariat? If this were to be the case, we first need to specify what constitutes the high cultural potential of the precarious youth Alex Foti speaks about. What is the common culture among the metropolitan precariat? Fragmented and diverse as it is, is contemporary culture capable of building bridges and creating alliances rather than isolation and niches? Apart from the odd explosion of solidarity and participation, the cultural baggage shared by the precariat, consisting in good amounts of self-irony and cynicism, is not so much a subversive power as a catalyst for unhappiness. In a review of a sociological study led by Gianfranco Zucca, Paolo Mossetti defined today's twenty-year-old Italians as "precarious natives", describing how the perception of risk has created new workaholics. They have adopted a novel lifestyle whereby working everywhere and all the time is normal. Homes become offices, and every post on social media can end up acting as a sounding board for the success of others. With gritted teeth and a forced smile, the precarious natives hide the drawbacks of often non-remunerated self-employment to 'pursue their dreams'. Cultural baggage and digital networks, the armory of the precariat according to Foti, become weapons *against*

the aspirational class Ventura speaks of, as these tools serve to discipline, contain and appease it.

How do the points of view of the authors discussed relate to one another? Sennett senses and dissects a key aspect of being precarious: individual disorientation. Standing sends out a warning: the anger of the precariat will soon turn into class hatred. Compared to the latter and to the usual talk about precarity Foti's *General Theory* shows optimism: the precariat can and must become a movement guided by an eco-populist policy. Ventura, on the other hand, hides his pessimism behind analysis. But one element that Foti and Ventura have in common is that they both reject a victimistic narrative. While Foti calls upon the precariat to arm itself, Ventura invites the aspirational class to face up to its own contradictions. By suggesting a comparison with what he calls "the real wretched of the Earth", Ventura denies the fact that one can be oppressor and oppressed at the same time, thus tending to rule out any kind of collective action. Rather than opting for the best analysis, it seems more productive to merge the various perspectives into an idea of precarity that takes into account both the way in which flexibility influences the personality, and the gap that exists between one's function in society and their perceived status. This idea should not a priori deny the possibilities of cooperation among the precariat but at the same time it needs to face up to its intrinsic controversies. Precarious movementism and the thesis of the aspirational class are useful to each other. Aspiration helps clarify the reasons why the precariat has difficulty becoming a class-for-itself, while the idea of a global precariat movement serves to challenge the harsh self-criticism and the pessimism contributing to the submissiveness of the aspirational class.





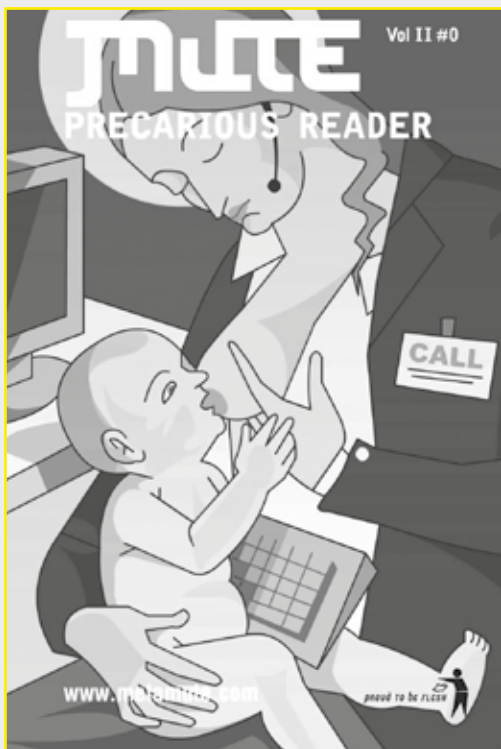
EuroMayDay Parade poster from 2009.



San Precario on display at a demonstration.  
Photo: Samuele Ghilardi.



*The Living Museum*, performance by Alina Lupu, 2017. The Romanian artist, who used to work for Deliveroo, walks through the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam wearing delivery equipment deprived of any recognisable brand. The iconic white cubic bag resonates with the space where she roams: another white cube, just bigger.



Cover of a special issue of Mute Magazine on the subject of precarity. The illustration shows a poster by Angelo Rindone entitled *Maternità*, part of a campaign by the Chainworkers collective.





*"I'm fifty-three, but I have the résumé of a much younger man."*

New Yorker cartoon by Barbara Smaller (2009) commenting on the ageism and disregard for seniority permeating the world of work.

## FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT: ENTREPRENEURIAL PRECARIAT OR PRECARIOUS ENTREPRENEURIALISM?

At first glance, the main common denominator for the large demographic segment that goes by the name of Millennials is technology. Those born between 1980 and 2000 are the first to have fully experienced the digital revolution, and already nostalgically commemorate its beginnings. Yet there is another aspect that distinguishes this generation from the previous ones. While the Baby Boomers have been able to count on a stable career and Generation X has complained about this lifestyle's limitations, for Millennials, a path deprived of detours is unrealistic if not outdated. It's the very idea of a career that falters against a shared horizon characterised by constant uncertainty. Those who are now twenty or thirty years old are intimately aware that the center of gravity of their professional identity is located within themselves, rather than in the companies with which they temporarily collaborate. This is what anthropologist Ilana Gershon calls the "quitting economy": an economy based, if one is lucky, on the possibility of moving freely or semi-freely between one job and another. Millennials make themselves their own enterprise, in line with the view of Ludwig von Mises, Austrian economist and champion of the free market, according to whom "in any real and living economy, every actor is an entrepreneur and speculator [...]".<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> — As Bröckling points out, the idea that every worker is at the same time an entrepreneur is not new: already in 1907 the German economist Lujo Brentano stated that the worker is an entrepreneur because he is responsible for selling his own labour power. According to Bröckling, the novelty lies in the fact that today the worker is required to act in an entrepreneurial manner even within the time exchanged for a salary.

But what does it mean to be an entrepreneur without having a real company to manage? As discussed earlier, for the young Schumpeter entrepreneurs were a rare species that stood at the top of the social pyramid because of its precious ability to innovate. Starting from similar premises, management guru Peter Drucker argued that to accelerate innovation, society as a whole would have to become entrepreneurial, getting rid of that disincentive to progress that is the permanent job. Drucker's vision is today a reality: in the face of widespread economic and employment insecurity, Schumpeter's pyramid has been reversed, or rather, it has disintegrated and the rubble is everywhere. Everyone is called to — or coerced into — free enterprise (even employees, as the concept of *intrapreneur* suggests).<sup>17</sup> This is the general sense of what we call *entreprenariat*.

### Entrepreneurship vs. Entrepreneurialism

As stated previously, when the entrepreneurial spirit gets to the people, entrepreneurship becomes *entrepreneurialism*.<sup>18</sup> A specific practice becomes common sense. Whereas by entrepreneurship we mean the practice of starting and managing a business through a certain amount of risk, entrepreneurialism corresponds instead to a value system reinforced by a colonisation of language happening within the media discourse and its individual internalisation. Entrepreneurialism laudes individual initiative, action and risk, equating them to

<sup>17</sup> ——— One is not necessarily urged to constitute an enterprise but to *behave* as one. In fact, as Michel Foucault suggests, “the enterprise is not just an institution” but “a way of behaving in the economic field — in the form of competition in terms of plans and projects, and with objectives, tactics, and so forth [...]”.

<sup>18</sup> ——— A variation on the term is “*entrepreneurism*”, which is, as Raymond, Kenneth and Rowland Kao, authors of the eponymous book, argue “not just about making money, nor is it merely about starting up a venture or owning a small business — it is a way of life, applicable to all human economic activities.”

autonomy and freedom — a paradoxical notion of autonomy, however, because it generates more constraints. Entrepreneurialism also requires what Laura Bazzicalupo calls “free and passionate strategic intentionality”. It follows that, to put it optimistically with Bob Aubrey, an expert professor of human development, “as far as the enterprise of the self is concerned, positioning is the identity that you occupy on a market”. Entrepreneurial rhetoric, however, faces us with a paradox: while treating the various Elon Musks as *sui generis* subjects, it pushes us to emulate their character and habits, turning their self-discipline — weekly diet, granted hours of sleep, etc. — into a fetish. Entrepreneurial devotion thus results in an ill-considered self-help exercise.

The relapses of this atmospheric pressure are measured psychologically, emotionally and affectively. “Fake it till you make it” is an expression that embodies the existential crisis of the *entreprenariat*. In a strictly entrepreneurial context, the motto is used when simulating the existence of a product in order to obtain the financing necessary for its realisation. Conversely, in terms of pop psychology, the slogan suggests pretending to be happy until one is truly happy. By mixing the two meanings, individuals become an incomplete product in constant optimisation that resorts to a conspicuous optimism to present themselves as autonomous to others (and to themselves), hoping to become just that. Although admittedly they are the masters of their own destinies, the responsibilities for their failures falls only on themselves.

By singing the praises of innovation, or a continuous change that coincides with a natural and healthy phenomenon, entrepreneurialism encourages precarity and deliberately activates precarisation mechanisms. “We are made to change” — as we hear in a recent IKEA

commercial. We finally understand the masterpiece of entrepreneurialism: having made an ontology out of social uncertainty, as Chicchi and Simone declared. For its part, precarity finds in the entrepreneurial drive one of the few ways out of its condition. And for those who do not find work or satisfaction in it, the answer is to become entrepreneurs in the broadest sense, or to manage their professional identity (which is not so different from identity as a whole) in apparent autonomy. Entrepreneurialism generates precarity, which in turn requires entrepreneurialism. This is how the vicious circle of the entreprecariat could be summed up. “The entrepreneurialisation of work is nothing more than the other side, fictitiously sold as positive and creative, of the process of precariousness of waged labour”, the Italian sociologists continue. If entrepreneurialism and precarity mix and give shape to an undifferentiated experience in which we no longer know where one ends and the other begins, the entreprecariat aims at discriminating, that is, removing the entrepreneurial veil surrounding the precarious question; while also deciphering the instrumentalisation of entrepreneurship to deal with the precarisation processes. For this reason, rather than a class or a static category, the entreprecariat indicates both a forcefield and a method to make it legible.

As proof of the enthralling quality of the entrepreneurial reason, here is a list of the various English portmanteau words found online that include the word entrepreneur: kidtrepreneur, momtrepreneur, wifetrepreneur, sofapreneur, pastorprenneur, girltrepreneur, teentrepreneur, want-repreneur, ontreprenneur, solopreneur, filmtrepreneur, dadtrepreneur, nontreprenneur, untreprenneur, designtrepreneur, foodtrepreneur, lawtrepreneur, contreprenneur, cantreprenneur, artreprenneur, apptreprenneur, ecotreprenneur, Altreprenneur, femtreprenneur, philanthreprenneur,

punktrepreneur, youngtrepreneur, funtrepreneur, learn-trepreneur, greentrepreneur, dronetrepreneur, botrepreneur and salontrepreneur. Of particular interest is the figure of the wantrepreneur, who aspires to become an entrepreneur; the solopreneur, who runs their own business individually, and the funtrepreneur, for whom entrepreneurship is a hobby, a mere matter of amusement.

According to Sennett, entrepreneurial success is up to those who are able to tolerate fragmentation and feel comfortable within instability, navigating changing scenarios with fervour. The precarious perspective is characterised by opposite feelings: it is a perception and expression of unease and disorientation. Both entrepreneurialism and precarity are, however, ways of dealing with change: the first tackles it with enthusiasm, the second with fear or dissatisfaction. But entrepreneurialism, with its proactive and therefore apparently constructive approach, delegitimises the claims of the precariat. Not only does entrepreneurialism deny and diminish precarious discomfort, but it does not admit its reasons: there is nothing to fear, risk is good for you. Yet this attitude towards change is not itself immutable. The World Economic Forum, which represented for Sennett the ideal fauna for change-makers, has been transformed, as Foti claims, into a symposium in search of a soul. Among the various guests in Davos, Guy Standing appeared with an alarm about the growing anger of the precariat accompanied by other presentations with titles that are certainly not reassuring; titles such as “A Dream Deferred” by Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund.<sup>19</sup>

Back among the common mortals, we meet the fashion

<sup>19</sup> Lagarde's message was that because of poverty and excessive inequality, youth in the European Union is falling behind other generations and might not be able to recover.

designer who pays the rent making home deliveries or the unemployed who calls himself a “startupper” in the signature of his email. However, the figure that we rarely come across is the one that openly adopts the point of view of precarity, given that this label contradicts the obligatory entrepreneurial pose. Who would be willing to give up publicly signalling a status that one day would hopefully materialise economically? What distinguishes the current professional (and therefore existential) *impasse* is a generalised cognitive dissonance. A condition similar to what Raffaele Alberto Ventura calls “class dysphoria”. If for Ventura the middle class feels rich even if it’s destined to poverty, the members of the *entreprenariat* need to *show* themselves as individuals rich of potential in the light of a growing poverty of opportunities to express their abilities.

Having said that, the subdivisions within the *precariat* identified by Foti relate differently to the entrepreneurial imperative. The creative class unambiguously embraces the entrepreneurial reason; epitomised by a recent book targeted at new graduates in design entitled *Don’t Get a Job... Make a Job: How to Make It as a Creative Graduate*. The formula of internships perversely feeds the illusion of autonomy of the creative *precariat*: although they are often unpaid or underpaid, internships are seen as an investment in the enterprise of the self. The service class (consisting of bartenders, waiters, babysitters, etc.) responds to similar logics as these jobs often constitute a source of income to finance a career in the so-called creative industries. The unemployed, on the other hand, are paternalistically urged by the State to *entreprendre*, to take charge of their own destiny, to become active citizens. Finally, there is the new working class, composed of, amongst others, logistics workers. A group that is perhaps the least exposed to the auto-en-

trepreneurial regime because, as Schumpeter said, it is too busy trying not to perish. In this sense, entreprecarity is a somewhat privileged condition because only a minority of precarious workers are allowed to have real entrepreneurial or auto-entrepreneurial ambitions. For the rest, the entreprecariat signals the fusion of economy and politics, or more precisely, the dissolution of politics into economy. The structural precarity that politics is not able to prevent or fix is reframed into a call to action for individuals to market themselves, an obligatory invitation to action. At the end of the 1970s, the historian Christopher Lasch hinted at an anthropological mutation: the economic man left room for the psychological man. Nowadays, the entreprecariat, by prescribing an individual attitude based on strategic positioning, gives birth to an economically psychological man.

## A Bureaucracy of One

Nowadays email, a means of communication which is endured more than employed, has become a symbol of the administrative dimension of the work carried out through digital devices. The *inbox zero*<sup>20</sup> is the vivid mirage of the “administrative subject” (to use an expression of the French author Michel Houellebecq).<sup>21</sup> In reality, the administrative subject is such as they are *administered* by the tasks they have to perform. And the victims of precarity find themselves confined into an ever-increasing self-administration. For this reason,

<sup>20</sup> ——— Inbox Zero is an email handling system formulated in 2007 by blogger Merlin Mann. The system soon became popular among tech companies like Google and grew into a broader philosophy of productivity. After a couple of years, a fervent critic of Inbox Zero turned out to be Mann himself, who realised that he was sacrificing most of his precious family time to teach others the secrets of personal productivity. In an interview with journalist Oliver Burkeman, Mann came to the conclusion that “[e]mail is not a technical problem. It’s a people problem. And you can’t fix people.”

<sup>21</sup> ——— “*Sujet administratif ordinaire*” in the original.



too, they are exposed to the entrepreneurial siren call, which presents itself as an alternative to this bureaucratic horror with its promises of self-realisation, autonomy and, ultimately, freedom.<sup>22</sup> Entrepreneurialism is about the dream of professional realisation, which is the only imaginable realisation, but also about the sense of agency, of control, of being master of one's own destiny. And so it becomes a status symbol, just as it becomes the stakhanovism typical of cult entrepreneurs. The promise is, however, fraudulent because the entrepreneur of the self is necessarily dependent on the intrinsic dimension of risk of free enterprise. To risk means constantly managing risk. Therefore, self-realisation is nothing more than an amalgamation of vocation and economic management, a radical form of self-administration. In other words, it is a bureaucracy of one, as claimed by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. According to Foti, precarity means both exploitation and liberation. The logic of the entreprecariat is more subtle, being first of all a worldview, an interpretation of reality that orients behaviour. By combining exploitation and liberation, the entreprecariat constitutes an exploitation of liberation. The illusory freedom offered by an unprotected job or by a title that does not produce income but only symbolic benefits is actually a tighter cage, a cage in which one must relentlessly self-administer their own bet on the future, one in which speculative action is a must.

### **Towards an Entrepreneurship of the Multitude?**

In addition to the existential dimension of the entreprecariat, the mutual influence between entrepreneurship and precariousness in economic, contractual and social relations can be more concretely noticed. In the

<sup>22</sup> The entrepreneurialist concept of freedom is peculiarly bound to time scarcity. When time is plentiful one might feel free of doing something but when time seems scarce one will try to be free from other people's demands.

United Kingdom for example, the couriers of the independent IWGB union, in the pocket of the gig economy, claim their rights by stating: “We are not entrepreneurs”. As discussed later in this book, in the United States, what Paolo Mossetti calls entrepreneurship of despair is now spreading: an increasing number of families are forced to bet on crowdfunding to finance their medical expenses, inventing campaigns that require managerial skills and internet literacy. In Japan, those employees without a fixed-term contract that have several low-profile jobs are called “freeters” (a neologism that combines the word ‘free’ with the German *arbeiter*). In Italy, we are witnessing the sorrows of the *popolo delle partite IVA* (literally “the VAT people”), whose members are often independent only on paper, while there’s an increase in the number of state programmes to convert NEETs, young people who don’t have a job and have stopped looking for one, into passionate startupper.<sup>23</sup> Finally, there are admittedly militant positions in the field of the *entreprenariat*. In her recent *Non è lavoro, è sfruttamento* (“This isn’t work, it’s exploitation”), Marta Fana offers a bleak portrait in which precarity itself emerges as the result of thirty years of policies in favour of companies and to the detriment of workers.

If so far we have interpreted entrepreneurship from a rhetorical perspective, it’s perhaps possible to recognise a genuine entrepreneurial energy intrinsic to precarity. This is what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri propose in *Assembly*, a programmatic essay that extends the famous trilogy of the *Empire*. An “entrepreneurship of the multitude” rejects the image of the demiurge entrepreneur who extracts innovation by orchestrating

<sup>23</sup> One of these programmes is the Italian SELFIEmployment, “aimed at young people (21-29 years old) who have a strong aptitude for self-employment and entrepreneurship and the desire to challenge themselves.”

cooperation from above. On the contrary, the authors favour the autonomous and horizontal administration of society, evident to their eyes in the dynamics of the new insurrectional movements. In fact, the *San Precario* 'brand', a collective and anonymous creation that emerged during the first tumults and born explicitly under the banner of the precariat, betrays at the very least a "bottom-up" entrepreneurial inclination.

However, after over ten years from the first appearance of the saint, there's still no agreement on what the fundamental mission of the precariat is. Let us therefore take up the main objectives proposed by Alex Foti: urban power, climate justice and Unconditional Basic Income (UBI). Ironically, this last goal is shared by some of the worshipped US entrepreneurs mentioned above. In their view, the UBI would favour individual initiative and the willingness to take risks, thus strengthening the entrepreneurial society. However, if recklessly implemented, an unconditional basic income could mean that a modest sum of money, if it were to be offered unconditionally and distributed to all citizens, could bury once and for all what remains of social welfare. Thus, while we await with anxiety or trepidation for the advent of the UBI, the possible paths seem to be two: to replicate the mantra of precarised entrepreneurship or to try to collectively bring about an entrepreneurial precariat. In this sense, the entreprecarious perspective, just as the narrative it refers to, is necessarily flexible and adaptable, or, using the techno-entrepreneurial vocabulary, is in "permanent beta". The entreprecariat brand is one thing and its opposite, it embodies the social and individual contradictions determined by the clash between precarity and entrepreneurialism.

## Phrenology of an Entrepreneur



The “Phrenology of an Entrepreneur”, presented by management consultant David Binetti in 2011 at the Startup Lessons Learned conference (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFztj9XSw-4>).

Binetti was critical about entrepreneurs’ tendency to create their own reality and their lack of patience.

fake it till  
you make it



Illustration taken from the ESPANIR blog, 2015.



Found image of a dog carrying its own leash. An appropriate allegory of freedom as self-subjugation promoted by entrepreneurialism.

NEVER STOP BUYING LOTTERY TICKETS,  
NO MATTER WHAT ANYONE TELLS YOU.

I  
I FAILED AGAIN AND AGAIN, BUT I NEVER  
GAVE UP. I TOOK EXTRA JOBS AND  
POURED THE MONEY INTO TICKETS.

I  
AND HERE I AM, PROOF THAT IF YOU  
PUT IN THE TIME, IT PAYS OFF!



EVERY INSPIRATIONAL SPEECH BY SOMEONE  
SUCCESSFUL SHOULD HAVE TO START WITH  
A DISCLAIMER ABOUT SURVIVORSHIP BIAS.

Comic by xkcd on survivorship bias. Creative Commons License (CC BY-NC 2.5).

# II.

# assets

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*I'm only being productive because  
I ran out of things to do that aren't work.*

Anonymous electronic postcard

For many, social media offer the space for a quick break from work, a break that can't be entirely controlled for two main reasons. First of all, for those who work on a computer, visiting social media does not imply any real break, but rather the instantaneous passage from one window of the screen to another. Secondly, dominant social media are designed to maximise the time spent on them. At the root of it all is the infinite scroll, a pervasive technique that transformed web pages into bottomless wells.<sup>1</sup>

### Never Work

Since the time-sucking reflex produced by the infinite scroll mechanism is very common, there are those who propose solutions. More than half a million users downloaded StayFocusd, an extension for Chrome created by Warren Benedetto, a developer who “[hasn't] had any spare time since 1994”. StayFocusd is simple: you select the time-consuming sites and decide how much time per day you can spend on them. StayFocusd is even able to monitor the links reached via these websites. Of course, users are tempted to change the settings each time they need a few more minutes, for example when they receive a message on Facebook. If they try to do so, StayFocusd proposes the challenge of retyping, without the slightest error, the following text:

<sup>1</sup> Infinite scroll allows web pages to be extended dynamically, that is, by periodically inserting new content into them.

The procrastinator is often remarkably optimistic about his ability to complete a task on a tight deadline; this is usually accompanied by expressions of reassurance that everything is under control. (Therefore, there is no need to start.) Lulled by a false sense of security, time passes. At some point, he crosses over an imaginary starting time and suddenly realizes, “Oh no! I am not in control! There isn’t enough time!”

StayFocusd is much appreciated. For a user it has been “sadly, the only way to end the university”. Many speak of a cure for social media addiction, as is the case of a very satisfied user who attempted to publish a tweet about it. *Ça va sans dire*, StayFocusd didn’t allow him. When the time expires, social networks and the like disappear replaced by a white screen that includes a big Arial header asking: “Shouldn’t You Be Working?”. Some argue that the lapidary reminder might be unprofessional. On the contrary, it is the dream of any supervisor: letting the software do the rebuke while being able to know exactly when the employee has tried to focus and failed.

The inscription somehow recalls the iconic graffiti on Rue de Seine made by Guy Debord in 1953. *Ne travaillez jamais*, never work, was the exhortation of the founder of the Situationist International. An intellectual property issue shows how important this message was for Debord. After a certain Monsieur Buffier had produced a series of postcards labeling the graffiti as “superfluous advice”, the philosopher’s response was not long in coming:

Given that it is well known that the great majority of people work, and that said work is, despite the strongest repulsion, imposed on the near totality

of workers by a crushing constraint, the slogan NEVER WORK can in no way be considered “superfluous advice.”

Debord's defense raises the question of whether or not it is superfluous to remind StayFocusd users that they should be working. Aren't they already aware of this? What is this memento for if not to increase the guilt they already feel? The inscription that suddenly appears on the screen is the cruel manifestation of a guilt that has become internalised.

Among this kind of coercive apps, we find some very imaginative ones. There is Freedom, which goes the whole hog and blocks your connectivity for a certain period of time. There is Isolator, which obscures all windows and icons other than the chosen one. There is Chatter-Blocker, which plays relaxing sound effects protecting you from office chatter. There is also another typology of apps that allows users to monitor their online activity and to extrapolate a detailed picture in which productivity and distraction are expressed in percentage. RescueTime, amongst the most popular ones, assigns a productivity score to each visited page: Google is considered neutral, Wikipedia and LinkedIn are productive, while Tumblr is very dispersive, like news and shopping sites.

Finally, there is Productivity Owl, an extension that embeds an owl on a perch into every webpage. At the end of the allotted time (30 seconds by default), the owl soars and heads for the current tab in order to close it. If you are nimble enough you can stop it. However, after a few seconds the owl will start crying insistently and eventually it will liberate itself to complete its mission. The obvious disclaimer is that this is an extremely annoying

app. Besides twirling in the browser, the owl requires users to earn its respect. How? By living up to one's intentions, that is, by avoiding to constantly change the app settings. The creator of ProductivityOwl claims that he lived for seven years below the poverty line because of his inefficiency. How could you blame him?

App stores are filled with tomatoes. For this, we must thank Francesco Cirillo, a developer and entrepreneur "who has dedicated his life to helping others improve their productivity." Cirillo is the inventor of the Pomodoro Technique, a time management method which essentially consists of a simple series of actions: identify a task, set a timer (possibly a tomato-shaped one, hence the name) to 25 minutes, work on a task until time runs out, take a short break, set a new tomato, and so on for four times, after which take a longer break. Conceived in the late '80s, when Cirillo was still a student, the Pomodoro Technique anticipated by far the advent of social media. But its popularity does not seem to be in decline. However, criticism is not lacking: according to the entrepreneur and performance coach Jameson Brandon, the obligatory break is counterproductive because some tasks may require more than 25 minutes. Furthermore, the method may provoke a form of 'tomato addiction', that is, focusing more on the imposed limit rather than on the very task to perform.

What has Jerry Seinfeld (yes, that Seinfeld) got to do with this subject? Well, he also invented a technique to be more productive. Called Don't Break the Chain!, it informs countless apps and online services. Here's how it works: you identify a task that you intend to pursue for some time, then you buy a calendar on which you draw a big X for each day in which you actually perform the above task. If you are consistent, the Xs will form a long

chain. The goal, at this point, is not to break it. In order for this technique to be effective one must have a clear purpose, identified from the start, that can be directly translatable into a task. Jerry Seinfeld has employed the technique to write new jokes and monologues every day, including the following one, solely dedicated to the inability to save time: “You try your whole life to save up time and at the end of your life, when you get to the end, there is no time saved up”.

Through an ascetic and athletic ethos, a more or less explicit psychological terrorism and a series of ingenious forms of castigation, the apps and methods I described promise a better work/life balance by optimising personal productivity. But they are not without limitations and side effects. Such systems are fighting what we call procrastination, but what is it exactly? According to psychologists Gregory Schraw, Theresa Wadkins and Lori Olafson, procrastination has three main characteristics: it is counterproductive, unnecessary, and it causes delay. The problem is that in an era that is no longer constituted by a clear threshold between work and leisure, any period of recreation, free time, rest, boredom or contemplation meets these criteria. There is always something more important to do and this causes anxiety and guilt. Can we identify a more substantial cause to these feelings? Broadening the view, the concept of procrastination can be seen as the product of a rationalistic approach that privileges efficiency: without the emphasis on personal productivity, the harmfulness of procrastination partially dissolves.

The erosion of the boundary between work and leisure is not new. As early as 1969, Theodor Adorno postulated that free time is nothing more than “a shadowy continuation of labour”. However, something has changed:

today we quantify our spare time according to the same logic of the tools used during work time. These are instruments that often require an active feedback, making productivity a part-time job in itself. Also, we deliberately decide to do so. A bit like in the Isolator app, leisure becomes an unfathomable black hole, nothing but absence of production for the purpose of subsequent production. We can consider the software a 'benevolent dictator' as it presents itself as magnanimous, inviting the user to take a break, take a breath of fresh air or even take a nap. It's the so-called *nannyware*, digital nannies who take care of us when we forget ourselves. In other words, a form of parental control extended to adults via a user interface for the sake of productivity. If we move from the field of industrial work to that of immaterial labour, from workplace productivity to personal productivity, it becomes difficult to formulate objective measurement criteria.<sup>2</sup> Formally, it corresponds to the relationship between input, time and output. Productivity increases when, given the same amount of time, the output increases or when, given the same output, time decreases. Should a writer's productivity be measured in characters? An objective measurement turns into a vague incitement: work smarter, not harder. It would seem that personal productivity has become an *aesthetic form*, the purpose of which is to create an impression of self-control, and to provoke "the pleasure entertained in the fantasy that time can be managed", as Melissa Gregg puts it.<sup>3</sup> The aesthetics of productivity is made up of graphs, statistics, to-do lists, countdowns,

<sup>2</sup> For the philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato, who described the concept in an essay of the same name, immaterial labour is the set of activities that produce the informational and cultural content of a commodity.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of personal productivity as aesthetics is developed by Melissa Gregg in her book *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*.

post-its, trills and notifications. The result is a vivisected time, the other side of what the German artist Hito Steyerl calls junktime: “broken down, kaputt on any level [...] wrecked, discontinuous, distracted and runs on several parallel tracks”.

Personal productivity is the aesthetic dimension of the work ethic. It is measured to increase efficiency but also to materialise one's own busyness, thus demonstrating to oneself and to others that one is occupied. Why do we repeat to each other the obsessive refrain of “I don't have time”? Because, as a study conducted by Silvia Bellezza, Neeru Paharia and Anat Keinan and published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows, busyness is no longer just a moral imperative (“Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins” said Max Weber) but is also a status symbol, a form of economic positioning that is the reversal of Veblen's traditional leisure: today, being wealthy does not mean having more free time, but being more overburdened. The aesthetics of productivity is well staged by the graphic designers Cox & Grusenmeyer in a project entitled *Bureau for Busyness*, which includes notepads quilted with post-it notes and stickers, sucked pens and notice boards full of Kafkaesque forms “for the illusion of a creative brainstorm”.

The proliferation of *chronotechnics*, digital or otherwise, is linked to the tradition of Taylorist measurement of the Gilbreth couple. The engineer Frank Gilbreth and his wife Lilian, who was also an engineer and a psychologist, became pioneers in the field of management. At the beginning of the last century they used light signals and long-exposure photographs to trace the gestures of the workers and suggest how to optimise them. Current chronotechnics, on the other hand, seem to allude

to the fact that dividing up time is enough to dominate it. Defined scans provide clear metrics to assess the temporal investment. This is where the influence of an entrepreneurial logic on the use of time can be found. Entrepreneurial time promises control and therefore autonomy: being the boss of oneself means mastering one's own time by putting it to work since, as Standing recalls, time itself has become a means of production. In *The Atlantic*, Melissa Gregg writes: "Productivity apps facilitate the pleasure of time management, which is ultimately the pleasure of control". Entrepreneurial time is predictable time. On the contrary, the precarious perspective focuses on the uncertainty of an exploded time, junk time, "timeless time", as Manuel Castells defines it; the precarious lens recognises the limits of chronotechnics, whether they are self-imposed or inflicted by someone else. Precarity goes beyond the aesthetic facade of productivity. It often happens that the two perspectives live together and interact with each other, as in Evernote's motto, a software that promises to "keep your progress predictable, even when the workday isn't". Or in the experience of StayFocusd's procrastinator who suddenly goes from the certainty of having everything under control ("Lulled by a false sense of security, time passes.") to the realisation of his own faltering position ("Oh no! I am not in control! There isn't enough time!").

## **There Is a Light That Never Goes Out**

The computer is first and foremost a calculator. Among the main things it calculates, and thus measures, there is the passage of time. As a result, our laptops and mobile phones are also chronometers. We find again Sennett who acknowledges this, stating that the "metric logic" of time denounced by Daniel Bell in the context of industrial work "has shifted from the timeclock to the computer screen". But what kind of time do devices take



into account? On the first startup, these devices immediately require the local time zone so that they can connect to the internet and automatically synchronise with the other ones in the network. This connection doesn't only imply a cancellation of spatial distance but also the possibility of experiencing a sort of telematic jet lag: we wake up and chat with a friend who lives eight hours away and is already at the end of their day. Sunrise and sunset are merged and obfuscated by means of network dynamics.

According to Jonathan Crary, author of *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, interconnected digital technology represents a privileged battlefield for the defeat of the night, and consequently of sleep, for the latter constitutes "an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism." A crusade that was already inherent to the modern project of industrial rationalisation. Before the widespread use of networked computers, in the Western world there were some persisting pockets of resistance, areas where the night had not yet been colonised by production requirements. In 1997 Franco Piperno could still assert that in Italy there was "not a single time, but a multiplicity of times, and some are, unfortunately, incompatible with each other." To paraphrase William Gibson, the absolute temporality of modernity was already here, just not evenly distributed.

Today things have changed: the web never sleeps. Global connectivity carries with it a ceaseless wakefulness indifferent to circadian rhythms, that clock inside our body that physiologically tells us when it's time to stay awake or go to sleep. The absolute, homogeneous, uninterrupted temporality of the network is reflected by screens that emit the same bluish light at any time of day or night. A light that has negative effects on vision,

since it is designed for daylight environments, and on sleep, since it inhibits the production of melatonin, creating a vicious circle in which staying in front of a screen at night prompts us to stay there even more.

Created in 2009 by two former Google employees, f.lux is an application that aims to solve these problems by automatically adjusting the colour temperature of the light emitted by the screen according to the local time and the illumination of the surrounding environment: when the sun goes down, f.lux makes sure that the screen gradually becomes yellowish. Nowadays, seven years later, the solution — only apparently simple — offered by f.lux has become an option available by default on many mobile devices. Generally, this function goes by the name of “night mode” or “read mode”. F.lux is somehow revolutionary because it injects a local temporality within the homogeneous flow produced by the digital experience. In this sense, the software allows us to customise its rhythm. However, it does little to dent the pervasive culture of overnight work. Rather than actually pushing users to turn off their computer, the notifications about the remaining hours of sleep sent by f.lux can only fuel their sense of guilt. It is no coincidence that, as one of the creators claims in an article by Matthew Braga for the Motherboard site, college students, for whom sleepless nights are often a default, represent one of the main user groups of the app. As it often happens, f.lux offers a technological solution to a broader social issue: it makes us work better at night. But while doing so, it invites us to spend even more time in front of the computer. F.lux brings the night inside the screen because nowadays there is no night without a screen.

Before going to sleep we seek some relaxation between a comment on Facebook and a series on Netflix. So,

our devices offer opportunities for leisure as well. But can we really speak of *free time*? When an increasing number of activities involves the continuous production, consumption and recombination of information mediated by a screen, the boundary between work and non-work, long since blurred, tends to dissolve. When work becomes primarily cognitive, fooling around online makes no exception. Whenever there is a screen, a genuine subtraction from the operational logic of digital media is equivocal.

Nevertheless, technological solutions do not necessarily have to make us more efficient or make us work better at night. Artist and programmer Sam Lavigne, in perfect Luddite style, exploits the hardware limitations to escape the totalising urge to be productive. Slow Hot Computer is a site that dramatically slows your computer down by making it perform laborious operations. In this way, you can't work with it anymore. Among the enemies of productivity there is also Kenneth Goldsmith, the poet who seeks to re-evaluate the time wasted on the internet, since he considers it a precious creative moment. Is daydreaming therefore a productive activity? Perhaps so, at least until the eyes close. Lowering the lights, f.lux accompanies us to sleep and invites us to abandon ourselves to unconsciousness. Taking a break from ourselves, we temporarily give in to our thirst for control. Now that we are completely exposed, that we have no way of acting, we find precarious peace.



Andy Hertzfeld recounts that in 1983 Apple's finance team produced a sweatshirt with this design to pay tribute to the efforts of the company's employees. Burrell Smith, one of Apple's leading engineers, used to wear the shirt almost every day. But when he quit the company in 1985, he hid the first figure with masking tape so that the sweatshirt would read "0 Hours A Week And Loving It".

# The Isolator

By HUGO GERNSBACK

MEMBER AMERICAN PHYSICAL SOCIETY



The author at work in his private study aided by the Isolator. Outside noises being eliminated, the worker can concentrate with ease upon the subject at hand.

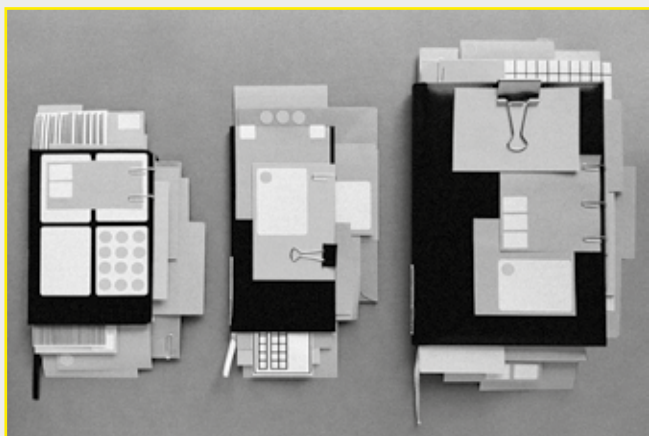
The Isolator, a device for improving concentration invented by science fiction writer Hugo Gernsback in 1925. "The author at work in his private study aided by the isolator. Outside noises being eliminated, the worker can concentrate with ease upon the subject at hand." Photo: Science and Invention, vol. 13, no. 3, July 1925.



Postcard based on Guy Debord's "NEVER WORK" graffiti made in 1953 in Rue De Seine, Paris. The caption, added against Debord's will, reads "superfluous advice".

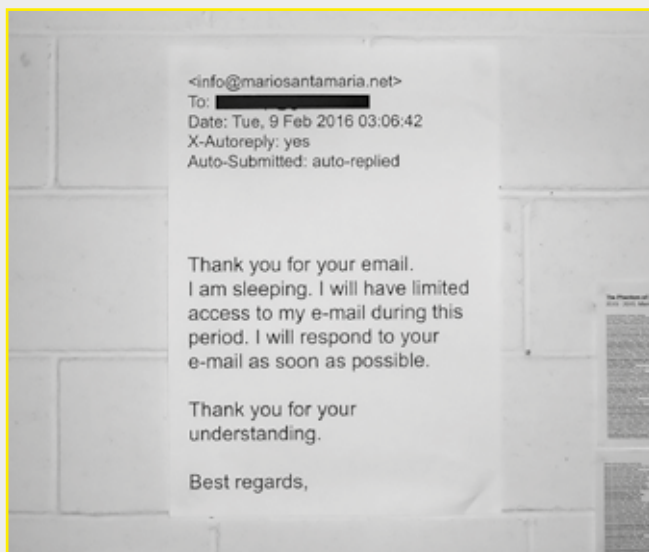


Documentation of a study carried out by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth in 1914 to track a worker's movements.



‘Decorated’ notebooks from the *Bureau for Business* project, developed by the graphic designers Cox & Grusenmeyer in 2013.





In 2016, Spanish artist Mario Santamaría created this automatic email reply to criticise always-on culture.



Logo of the f.lux app.



Instagram post by user @scariest\_bug\_ever suggesting that both work and leisure time are now mediated by screens.



*5 min, 1h, tonight, tomorrow... (Remind me later)* by Aram Bartholl. In the installation, made in 2016, the computer screen is replaced by a UV light, a gesture that associates circadian rhythms to the homogeneity of the digital experience.



*Slow Hot Computer* created by Sam Lavigne in 2015, a website that makes a computer run slow and hot to decrease its user's productivity. Installation for Artificial Retirement, Flux Factory, NY.

# Wasting Time on the Internet

Kenneth Goldsmith



*Wasting Time on the Internet* by Kenneth Goldsmith, published in 2016.

*First, make the office feel like a home  
— if anything, the real home.*

J.G. Ballard

With the spread of smartphones, immaterial work has become a constant in our lives. A work that exists both as *actuality* (the email you are replying to), and as *potentiality* (the red notification for unread emails). Of course, there are precedents, such as the laptop, and before that the desktop computer. Even with the telephone, remote work was possible. Yet the smartphone represents a qualitative change that radicalises the mobility and ubiquity of our tasks. Digital devices did not just bring the office into our homes, bags and pockets, they also multiplied the types of tasks we have to do. Tasks like marketing and PR for ourselves and our products, management of our weekly or monthly agenda, organisation of meetings, setting of passwords and so on. Once all this peripheral work is done, the real work can finally begin. We are hyperemployed.<sup>4</sup>

Some time ago, the French Socialist Party tried to counter the “digital burnout” caused by overtime and exacerbated by peripheral work. The idea was to give workers the right not to access the company email after office hours. The need for a right *not* to do something says a lot about the culture of perennial availability. Former minister Benoît Hamon found the situation extremely worrying:

employees physically leave the office, but they do not leave their work. They remain attached by a

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘hyperemployment’ was proposed by philosopher Ian Bogost.

kind of electronic leash — like a dog. The texts, the messages, the emails — they colonise the life of the individual to the point where he or she eventually breaks down.

Although this is a valid starting point for a collective conversation on the subject of hyperemployment, the law on the “right to disconnect” clashes with the fact that nowadays many people do overtime *voluntarily* and in some way inevitably, since there seems to be no escape from peripheral work. When work becomes both internalised and generalised, any form of regulation not preceded by a profound cultural change is bound to fail.

Work has crossed a number of boundaries, such as the temporal one (when one works) and the spatial one (where one works). Let us consider the latter: how does the use of digital devices influence the spaces inhabited by nomad workers? How did hotel rooms, cafes, trains and bookstores become informal workplaces? And how does our relationship with laptops, tablets and mobile phones influence our experience of them? Do these “coded spaces”, to use the expression coined by Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, perform the same functions as offices? In the 1960s Mario Tronti, a prominent theorist of workerism, condemned the fact that the factory was spilling out into the city. By this he meant that the factory’s rationale was beginning to encroach on urban space and its social dynamics. Nowadays, it is the office environment that best embodies the mode of production of immaterial work. And the office knows no boundaries.

Let’s start with an obvious consideration: informal workplaces are first and foremost suppliers. They offer the primary resources the nomad informational worker



needs: electricity and internet connection. Go to a bar and you will see its patrons casting their eyes around for the wifi password. Enter an airport and travellers will be connected to the power grid through the umbilical cord of their chargers.

“Is that an office in your pocket?” asks CEO of Fiverr Micha Kaufman.<sup>5</sup> However, the idea that a single device is all you need to perform all types of tasks still remains an illusion: laptops, tablets, e-readers and smartphones coexist (not to mention analog devices: notebooks, books, pens, etc.). Because of this multiplicity, workers are careful how they choose the equipment needed to carry around appliances, peripherals and other work tools. That’s why so many crowdfunding campaigns try to come up with the ultimate backpack for life and work: like SOLO, thanks to which you’ll “travel happier and be more productive”; or Lifepack, powered by solar energy and divided into two sections, a workzone and a life-zone. The creators of Lifepack claimed to have “re-invented the mobile office” and their Kickstarter, which aimed for twenty thousand dollars, ended up raising more than six hundred thousand. Seemingly, the most important extension of the nomad info-worker is not the device, but what contains it: the backpack.

Informal work spaces have a relationship component: they influence, and are influenced by the people who inhabit them and by their interactions. The devices do the same as digital technology is creating new social rituals that have to do with, amongst other things, the concept of busyness. Busyness is codified not only in tablets and mobile phones (with push notifications, alerts and a range of memoranda) but also in dedicated additional

<sup>5</sup> We’ll talk about Kaufman again in the third chapter, specifically in a section entirely devoted to Fiverr, the company he co-founded.

devices, including a small traffic light that connects to the laptop and turns red when the user is busy. However, there is no need for traffic lights to convey the message: just wear a pair of headphones, even if they aren't emitting any sound. By giving up one of our senses, we communicate the will to isolate ourselves.

## **The Helicopter Company**

Meanwhile, the office, the real one, embraces leisure and disguises itself as a campus or even as a playground, making younger employees feel at ease while seniors can retreat to the mental state of college students or even teenagers. The Mountain View Googleplex is a case in point. The complex, replicated for the occasion at the Georgia Institute of Technology, provides the backdrop to *The Internship*, a 2013 comedy in which two fortysomethings land an internship at Google, surrounded by budding programmers complete with helicopter hats.<sup>6</sup> The cool office increasingly includes places for relaxation, fun and socialising where you can take a snooze in a nap pod, call your partner from a private room, play ping pong with colleagues, and drink a mojito at the company's free bar before going home. For Alexandra Lange it is a ploy to accumulate more hours of work, seeing that when work becomes social, socialising means working:

The more you have on campus, the less need there is to leave it, and the longer employees stay. The longer they stay the more work they do. The more open the office, the more varied and appealing its

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Ross offers an earlier account of a company-as-playground, that of Razorfish, which was one of the first and largest interactive agencies. This is how Angela McRobbie condenses Ross's observations: "[the office] seems like a children's playground with some fish [this is how the employees used to call themselves] bringing in their scooters, most sporting tattoos and day-glo coloured hairstyles, amid an atmosphere reminiscent of club, pub or party".

spaces and foodstuffs, the more encounters they have. And the more encounters they have, the longer the chain of innovation grows.

At the time of Tronti's social factory, there were those who eagerly awaited the advent of a leisure society. This prediction has proved to be partially correct: some are part of a leisure society, but one where leisure has been incorporated into their work. Free time but not *freed* time. Self-employed workers and freelancers who aspire to this type of productive leisure can rent a desk in a coworking space, often splashed with propaganda about sharing ideas and having fun. I happened to visit some of these spaces: one of them housed a missile or perhaps a submarine bearing Andy Warhol's message, "everybody should like everybody". This can be somehow perplexing, given that the current coworking model is the commercial transformation of a political intent: to ensure that precarious workers can overcome their isolation by cooperating under one roof. Sebastian Olma, who was involved in the European coworking movement since its inception, confirms the original presence of such intent. *Digital bohemians*, a mixture of "not only business hipsters, but also anarchists and hippies [...] gave the coworking movement its temporary edge, producing successful businesses as well as providing space — coworking spaces — where strategies against precarity were plotted and developed." However, his conclusion is pessimistic: "Today, coworking as a politically, culturally, and even economically innovative phenomenon is all but history." On the Italian blog Doppiozero, Cristina Morini explains that coworking is "a useful idea, born from the bottom up, to try to draw work away from the individualisation and isolation brought about by precarity, by insisting on the social and collaborative aspect of the process". In this regard,

she reports the opinion of the Rete dei Redattori Precari (Precarious Editors Network):

In Milan, and in all the big cities, the spaces dedicated to coworking have sprung up like mushrooms: spaces where you can rent a workstation and 'network' with other 'freelancers'. The idea of working together, and not in the solitude of your four walls, has always pleased us at the Rete dei Redattori Precari; but having to pay to work and socialise, decidedly less so.

Self-employed workers renting desks at the Talent Garden in Turin, a kind of international coworking franchise, take up the theme of precarity. A freelance graphic designer explains that "the world of permanent jobs like our parents' no longer exists. We have got to get our heads round it. Although it is normal to feel lost when you let your desk go in a studio. I don't think of it as precarity: better to talk about flexibility, the concept we need to grow". And so, while the idea of *sociality as a service* is becoming increasingly widespread, precarity acts as an involuntary testimonial. Morini continues: "the need for social relations, contacts and social visibility are turned into services offered to the person, for a fee". The value of social life is reflected in urban rituals such as the 'apericena' (an afterwork evening drink with finger foods etc.), which according to Valerio Mattioli is a liturgy typical of the creative class: the apericena compresses aperitif and dinner in both a social and temporal sense.

We have already referred to the relational component of informal work spaces. In the case of coworking, what kind of relationship is it? Sociologist Adam Arvidsson speaks of "weak solidarity", a kind of solidarity at the service of the market. Solidarity in terms of personal branding,

networking and positioning, solidarity deprived of any critical spirit: *entrepreneurial* solidarity. Although weak solidarity extends beyond the scope of coworking, it is legitimate to ask whether it makes sense to use such a dense term. If the attitude is entrepreneurial, what's left of actual solidarity? As we saw in the first chapter, the definition of a competitive and positional 'me' stands in the way of a 'we'. Yet coworking makes 'we' its winning factor. How can this be explained? It could be said that sociality and cooperation are the *home décor* of coworking. As Francesco Marullo claims, the architecture destined for rental is empty, generic, neutral and made to provide a stage and a calm backdrop for work that is increasingly collaborative and performative.

Renyi Hong highlights the role of architecture and furnishing in places like WeWork, a global network of spaces for collaborative work defined as "a capitalist kibbutz" by its founder, the Israeli Adam Neumann. The members of WeWork and WeLive (its twin service dedicated to living) happily dwell in spaces pasted with messages such as "Thank God it's Monday". Hong states:

The spacious lounges, sleek desks, fair trade coffee, and calming ambient music [...] may help blunt the anxieties of precarity, cultivating the psychologies which enable workers to realize their laboring potentials despite difficult conditions.

Ironically, however, it is WeWork itself that ends up revealing the limits of weak solidarity. As Kate Aronoff reports on Dissent, when the cleaning staff tried to unionise, Neumann published a letter stating that unions don't make sense in the context of WeWork because WeWork is a family, and all the employees are part of it in the same way. A PR-style weak solidarity clashes here

with the strong solidarity of a group of workers paid \$10 an hour and forced to wear t-shirts with the words “do what you love” written on them.

## **Mobile Büro**

Going back to the office, certain routines, such as the lunch break are often more or less fixed. Office life is divided into periods of time marked by a series of interruptions while work in the digital environment is uniform and continuous. Here time management is often delegated to apps, which remind us to drink a glass of water, to go to sleep, or to stand up every fifteen minutes. With their informal and friendly language, these apps look more like nanny or motherly figures than supervisors. If the office is distributed throughout the city, workers have no control over the peripheral workplaces and are left with no choice but to keep a check on themselves. The zones that they inhabit are, so to speak, temporary but not autonomous. They are ‘squatted’ for electrical energy, Wi-Fi and a faint feeling of belonging. Like urban sherpas, we carry devices that serve to power us up. But in view of the perennial search for a place to recharge these devices, the opposite seems to be happening. We become the physical extension of the medium on which we depend.

In 1969 the Austrian architect Hans Hollein designed the Mobile Büro, an inflatable office contained in a briefcase. According to Andreas Rumpfhuber, author of several essays on the architecture of immaterial work, the mobile office can be considered more like a performance than a real project, given that it was presented in a demo video broadcast by Austrian TV, as part of a programme dedicated to new utopias. The video begins with the landing of a small aircraft. With his leather jacket and carrying a briefcase, Hollein steps out and heads towards a wide lawn followed by another person in a

shirt and tie carrying a drawing table. At this point Hollein inflates his office with an old vacuum cleaner, slips into his transparent bubble and gets to work, equipped only with pencil, ruler, portable drawing board and telephone. From within his bubble Hollein receives a customer's call and, once his drawing is finished, deflates the structure and sets off again in his plane.

As Rumpfhuber notes, there is nothing futuristic about Hollein's mobile office as the materials and objects are common items, a bit clumsy, even old-fashioned. What is futuristic, or at least contemporary, is the architect's way of working, and how he no longer inhabits the studio, but takes it with him. Is it really a studio though? Several times Hollein describes his blow up structure as a portable home. The inflatable bubble is not only ideal for the outdoor spaces where it is put, but also for the practical needs of those who live in it. Adaptation is the category that best describes the work of the new architect and of the immaterial worker in general. As the mobile office iconically shows, adapting means isolating oneself: protecting oneself from the outside world while interfacing with other human beings through the mediation of communication channels. In the words of Rumpfhuber:

[...] the pneumatic bubble is an architectural prototype of a new paradigm of a creative entrepreneurial subject: the soft and squashy sphere isolates the architect from their immediate surroundings. It produces an insular indoor climate in which the worker is immersed and thus, no matter where, becomes active, and is only then able to work.

Thanks to the Mobile Büro, finally workers can work where they like and when they like. And yet this promise of autonomy in the form of an inflatable structure betrays

the deep dependence of the worker, who is like a foetus in the womb. According to Rumpfhuber, Hollein spent a lot of time on his personal brand. He was an entrepreneur, a man of a thousand ideas. If he had had the chance, would he have launched a campaign on Kickstarter to mass produce his mobile office?

## Digital Nomad

In the video Hollein presents himself as globally active, a professional always on the move. Today we would call him a digital nomad. As Nicola Bozzi explains in an article for Not magazine, the term refers to someone who “works remotely thanks to the internet, putting independence from the rhythms and alienation of wage labour as a priority and taking control of their own time”. Digital nomadism, says Bozzi, has become a social goal whose origins lie in the electronic cottage of Alvin Toffler, the alternative to the cubicle theorised in the early 1970s. But the term was officialised in 1997 with the publication of *Digital Nomad* by Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners. According to the two authors, what makes up the new nomad subjectivity is an innate spirit of adventure mixed with companies’ increasingly strong demand for flexibility, and the reduction in size of devices. The rhetoric of digital nomadism resonates in spatial metaphors that emerged during the early days of the web: the idea of surfing and navigating, as well as the old Microsoft slogan: “Where do you want to go today?”

The allure of adventure is contradicted by the side effects of digital nomadism, specifically the emergence of places dedicated to the creative class, a category defined by Richard Florida that has had an impact on promoting a certain type of urban renewal. Artists short of cash venture into peripheral neighbourhoods, increasing the area’s “Bohemian Index” (quantity ratio between



artists and the general population). After a while, independent galleries, studios, as well as coworking and cafés begin to appear, all measure of the “creative index” (creativity, innovation, hi-tech, queer presence, etc). These in turn attract digital nomads, happy to enjoy the ‘artistic’ atmosphere as they beaver away on their laptops. At this point investments kick in and prices rise, erasing what remains of the bohemian atmosphere that started the whole process. The artists, annoyed by the residential tedium that surrounds them and exhausted by the rising living costs, move elsewhere and the cycle starts all over again. The mechanism is similar to that of tourism, which erases the very authenticity to which it aspires. Rightly, Bozzi links digital nomadism to the emergence of “tourist-working hubs” not only in the nerve centres of global capitalism like London, Berlin or New York, but, as stated on the Nomad List site, in cities such as Belgrade, Medellín and Phuket. The various destinations are organised according to a Nomad Score that takes into account climate, speed of connection, rental costs per square metre, but also safety for women, freedom of speech, and LGBT friendliness.

Informal work, colonisation of living spaces, permanent connectivism and cosmopolitanism blend together in New Eelam, a project halfway between a start-up and an artwork. The service offered by New Eelam is called Global Roaming and is accessed via an app. In return for a flat-rate subscription, about the same as the cost of a monthly rent, the user gains access to a series of luxurious apartments in the most dynamic neighbourhoods of some of the world’s hippest cities. Before the guest arrives, each house is tidied up according to specific settings. In other words, New Eelam offers cloud-based housing. “Wouldn’t it be nice if you didn’t have to be wealthy to have multiple homes around the world?”

reads the website of New Eelam, which in Tamil means new homeland. The project is by artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas in collaboration with curator Annika Kuhlmann, and seems like a turbospeculative version of WeWork and WeLive. As Jeppe Ugelvig says in DIS Magazine, “As a corporate entity, New Eelam owes its architecture equally to the historical notion of the socialist coop and the contemporary sharing economy start-up, two seemingly opposing structures that nonetheless converge via technology in our contemporary socio-economic reality”.

With flip-flops, shorts and a camping backpack, the globetrotting professional travels in solitude to places that appear as if made to be seen through an Instagram filter. Between one adventure and the next, we see them open their laptop to answer the odd email. This stereotype of the digital nomad is part of a wider celebration of nomadism as a lifestyle; what the sociologist Pascal Gielen, focusing on the world of contemporary art, calls *nomadeology*. According to Gielen, nomadic ideology has borrowed the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari (‘rhizome’, ‘exodus’, ‘diaspora’ etc.) to naively glorify life on the road. For the sociologist it is an obscene ideology because it ignores the other side — the more concrete one — of contemporary nomadism, which includes the tragedy of migrants, the forced displacement of workers and the hostility towards the Roma people.

Nomadism as a lifestyle is promoted by Remote Year, a programme that brings together a group of professional pioneers that reject the idea of “working for the weekend”, and gives them the opportunity to live for a year in twelve different destinations, at the price of two thousand dollars a month (less than what you would spend in London, San Francisco or New York, claims Remote

Year). The programme, with its series of events dedicated to local communities, seems like an organised holiday, but with the addition of a space to work open 24 hours a day in each of the destinations.

For the digital nomad, the seemingly relaxed productive dynamism is synonymous with freedom. In a sense, digital nomadism is the glamorous side of remote work done at whatever time from bed, bar, train or plane. A sense of autonomy expressed publicly hides the mild alienation experienced in the temporarily occupied non-places. The informal spaces of work, inhabited optimistically by the digital nomad or less optimistically by the nomad worker, are precarised spaces, since consolidation of a continuous relationship with them is neither foreseen nor allowed. Leonardo Previ, professor at the Catholic University of Milan and author of the book *Zainocrazia* (literally backpack-crazy), states openly: "Work is not a place, the instruments are in the backpack", and concludes with an invitation to challenge oneself: "A little risk, a little precarity is good: we have an entire planet at our disposal". Work may not be a place, yet workplaces have multiplied and the logic that organises them is once again dictated by time: precarised space is space organised by the time entrepreneurialism has vivisected. After talking about digital nomadism, it might be surprising to think of the home as one of these precarised spaces, and yet it can be increasingly considered an entrepreneurial non-place. Architecture historian Beatriz Colomina points out that in New York City, 80% of young professionals work regularly from bed. Previously an emblem of leisure time and rest, the bed is colonised by work, thus becoming more and more recognisable as office-like and alien to its traditional function. "The boudoir is defeating the tower", observes Colomina. Furthermore, if we think

of the spread of Airbnb, the house as a whole comes to appear as an entrepreneurial asset generating a semi-passive income.

## Nostalgia

As the traditional office dissolves into computers and a series of informal semi-public or private spaces (not least of which one's bed or kitchen), we find ourselves beginning to idealise it. We are at the dawn of a new era of *office nostalgia*, which feeds on a romantic idea of the cubicle, of the casual chat at the coffee machine which strengthen complicity between colleagues. The traditional office becomes a symbol of authority that employees can rail and conspire against. An example of this brand of nostalgia is the Facebook group Generic Office Roleplay Public Group, where members evoke the kind of office memos typical of the golden age of Microsoft. Another example is Smash the Office, a mobile phone game that seems inspired by the 1995 movie *Office Space*, or the 'office rage' featured on numerous Youtube videos. In Smash the Office the player has to break as many computers, desks, plants and chairs as possible. Is this the only form of anger left to the nomad worker? Anyhow, what else could they destroy... the local Starbucks?



Illustration of the features of the Lifepack backpack for its Kickstarter campaign, which raised more than \$600,000.



Keyboard baggy jeans prototyped by Dutch design student Erik De Nijs in 2008, the ultimate extension of the digital nomad.



Inside Google offices in San Francisco in 2008. Photo: Scott Beale/Laughing Squid.



Anthony Burrill's posters spotted in London's financial district by design critic Francisco Laranjo.

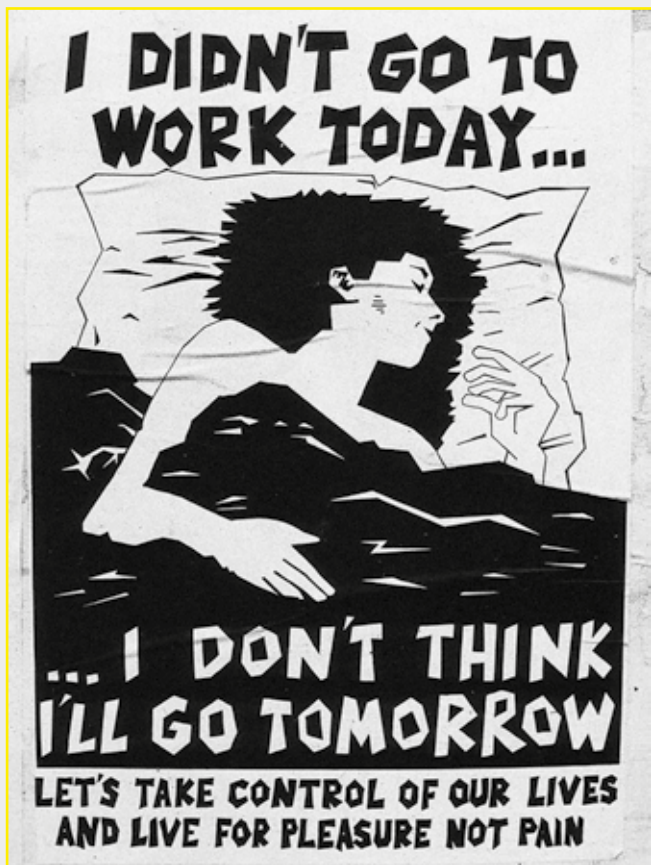




Photo taken from the magazine *Werker* ([www.werkermagazine.org/domesticwork](http://www.werkermagazine.org/domesticwork)), produced in 2017 by the Domestic Worker Photographer Network. The photo reads: “name: ulla / age: 31 / job: artist / location: amsterdam / day of the week: Saturday”. Creative Commons License.



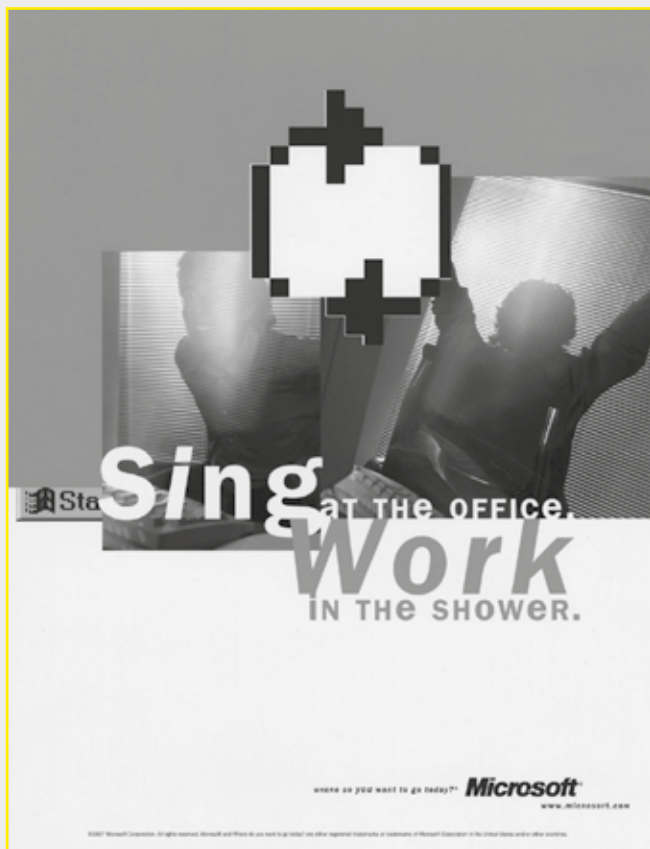
Cave-like installation by Canadian artist Shawn Maximo, part of *Deeprecession* (2019), an exhibition that focuses on “the representation of a society where the promise of entrepreneurship is never what it seems”. Image courtesy of the artist and Roehrs & Boetsch.



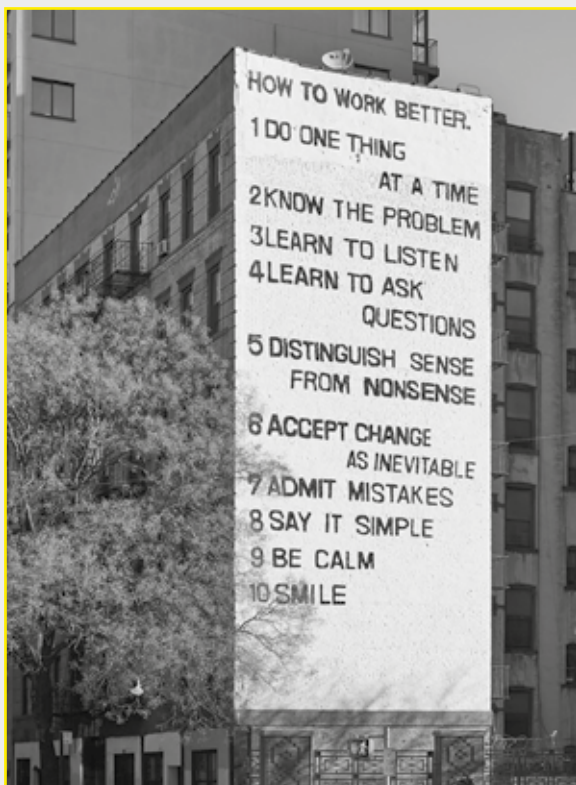
Poster distributed in 1987 by the anarchist collective Fifth Estate. At that time the bed was still synonymous with the refusal to work.



Mobile Büro by the Austrian architect Hans Hollein,  
1969.



"Sing at the office. Work in the shower". Microsoft advertising campaign, 1997. Design by David Carson.



With their *How to Work Better* mural, 1991, a wall-sized list of advice was painted both in Switzerland and the US, artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss wittily comment on the culture of efficiency, niceness and self-management.

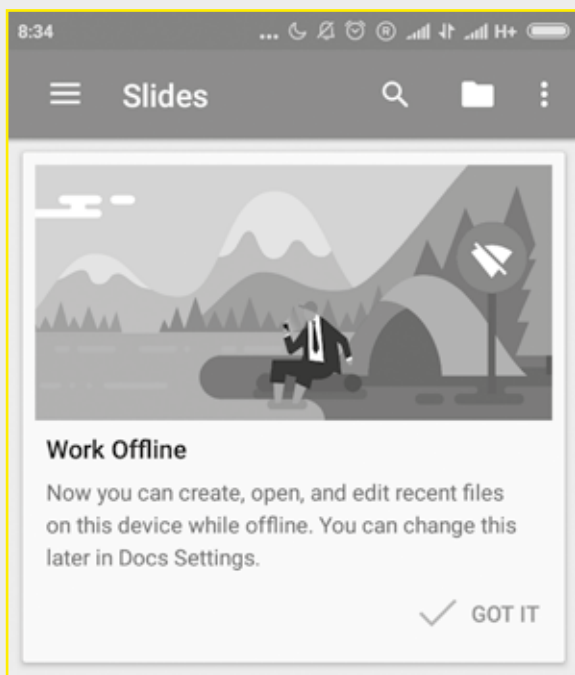


*WeWork Street*, an unauthorised public action organised by comedy collective Improv Everywhere. New York City pedestrians were invited to rent a WeWork desk inside a pair of old phone booths for between \$300 and \$500. Some people seemed to like the idea.



Advertisement included in a scene from the movie *Sorry to Bother You*, directed by Boots Riley in 2019. Worryfree is a fictional company that promises the security of a traditional waged job in exchange for personal freedom. In the banner, life and work are combined for the sake of convenience.





Notification from Google Slides app including a stereotypical illustration of digital nomadism: naked feet, eyes on the device.



Out Of Office straw hat which celebrates vacations, and yet, while doing so, it reminds the wearer of the office's existence during holiday time.



Screenshot of *Smash the Office* videogame, published in 2013.

*Stop watching the news!*  
*Because the news contrives to frighten you*  
*To make you feel small and alone*  
*To make you feel that your mind isn't your own*  
 Morrissey

What lies behind personal success? Obviously talent, the environment, commitment... but among the various factors at play, there is one that these days seems to be more important than the others: attitude. An adage circulating on the web claims that success is 1% aptitude and 99% attitude. Disposition triumphs over predisposition. In other words, it is vastly more important how we approach a hurdle than the instruments we adopt to overcome it. Or rather, the way we face it *is* the instrument. The motto reflects the point of view of Dale Carnegie, author of the self-help classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. According to Carnegie, financial success is due only in small part (15%) to technical skills. What makes the difference (85%) is the “skill in human engineering, [...] personality and the ability to lead people”.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as Tom Peters reasons, it is better to hire on the basis of attitude, concentrating only later on skills.

Celestine Chua, born in 1984 in Singapore, came up with the attitude/aptitude ratio. Celes (her nickname) runs PersonalExcellence.co, a personal development site that promises to help you “live your best life”. One

<sup>7</sup> On the internet the quote is often attributed to the Carnegie Institute of Technology, founded by corporate tycoon Andrew Carnegie. Dale Carnegie is said to have changed his name (Carnagey) so as to be associated with the famous philanthropist.

of Celes's video tutorials is titled *How to Stay Positive All the Time*. This is not an occasional exercise because if success is the direct result of attitude, positive thinking acquires instrumental value. This is why the entrepreneurial vision has made optimism a crucial asset. The view is that any skill, be it inborn or acquired, physical or mental — the infamous human capital — can be converted into profit.

In the 1/99% formula the advantages and disadvantages of the environment are irrelevant — rich or not, what makes the difference is attitude. If you really want it, you *can and must* have it. It follows that the entire negativity spectrum — from sadness to fear, and including cynicism and anger — is inadmissible and intrinsically destructive. Criticism is tolerated, but only the *constructive* kind, that is, criticism devoid of negativity. And while it is cleaned up, we begin to suspect that it isn't criticism at all. This becomes particularly evident when most relationships are linked in one way or another to the world of work. In a context where positivity acts as a social lubricant, the so-called *naysayers* are frowned upon as they threaten its fragile balance. But wasn't it Peter Drucker who argued that the entrepreneur's job is to "upset and disorganise"? Attitudinal conformism contradicts the entrepreneurial doctrine.

### **Think Positive**

Even if we ignore the usefulness of an inclination for negativity, the actual benefits of forced and permanent positivity remain doubtful. Author Barbara Ehrenreich has dedicated an entire essay to the plague of positive thinking in the United States. *Smile or Die* is a scathing and at times paradoxical book, as its title betrays tragic implications. Ehrenreich sees positivity not simply as a state of mind that permeates the spirit of the nation,

but as an ideology that normalises — and therefore normativises — optimism. Mind you, it isn't hope, which is an emotion that cannot be fully controlled and propagates but optimism, a “cognitive attitude” that can, at least in theory, be developed through practice. Fueled by the spread of self-help books and the growing popularity of positive psychology (not exactly neutral when it comes to scientifically proving the relationship between happiness and health), positive thinking has become an obsessive refrain that is hard to neglect. This is particularly true in the United States, where the ground is fertile, given that it is a country that has made a hymn to optimism. If, as it has been said, entrepreneurs are optimistic by nature, the United States is optimistic by tradition.<sup>8</sup>

The author explains that positive thinking has its roots in Calvinism since, while emerging as a reaction to this form of “socially imposed depression”, its most harmful aspects — reflective judgment and perennial self-examination — remain unchanged. Positive thinking elicits the exegesis of the real: every negative fact is such only in appearance as all crises conceal an opportunity. Have you been fired? Be grateful and don't complain otherwise the opportunities won't crop up, indeed it will be you that disappears, since one of the corollaries of positive thinking is to remove the negativity around you. In short, positive thinking is nothing but an elaborate exercise in self-deception that serves as a survival strategy. In this regard, Ehrenreich issues a warning:

<sup>8</sup> The mobilisation of optimism is not only a US phenomenon. In the Netherlands, for example, welfare recipients, in order to be “activated”, are taught to be optimistic about their professional future, even if there is no evidence that such hope is grounded. The opposite scenario is present instead as the coaches themselves are in a precarious work position. It's what sociologists Josien Arts and Marguerite van den Berg call “pedagogies of optimism”.

the flip side of positivity is [...] a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must be because you didn't try hard enough, didn't believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success.

Moreover, the author considers the inevitability of success one of the reasons why Americans are not particularly sensitive to social inequality: those who have faith in the social upward climb have no need to protest.

### **Emotional Wallpaper**

If optimism is an imperative, it must somehow be induced into one's own personality or at least flaunted publicly. Public demonstration of emotion was addressed in a seminal study by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, entitled *The Managed Heart* and published in 1979. Hochschild focused on the job of flight attendants, mainly women, examining how affections and emotions become a professional tool.

Emotional labour, the spot on term introduced by Hochschild, has been adopted by numerous scholars. By this we mean work sold in exchange for a wage and which consists of managing one's own feelings in order to produce a reaction publicly visible in the body and face. In the author's view "emotion work" done for money acquires exchange value, while similar work carried out in private life has use value. Places and occasions influence how we provoke and express emotions, much like the emotional atmosphere of a church during a rite will be different from that of an airport. The combination of occasion and place is therefore comparable to a stage that suggests or prescribes "feeling rules". To adapt to these rules, we practice either "surface acting", intervening only on our external appearance, or "deep acting",

where we draw on our previous emotional baggage. The latter is a kind of Stanislavsky method that requires self-analysis and training and is often applied unconsciously to respond to real situations. The practical implications of a renewed centrality of emotions at work were evident even at the time of her studies, when Hochschild describes the case of a telephone company that offered medicines such as Valium, Darvon and codeine without prescription to help employees manage their mood.

What mood though? Although there are cases in which emotional work involves the display of negative emotions (think of debt collectors), it is fair to say that the contemporary world of work is mostly characterised by a positive sentimental spectrum. We are talking docility, courtesy, optimism, enthusiasm, exaltation and sometimes even fervour. This emotional sphere is useful on the one hand to eliminate any friction in social relationships and on the other to position oneself, projecting an image consistent with the entrepreneurial requirements of the job. A quick look through the job ads confirms it. The key word is *passion*, which not by chance also means pain: far from being a natural disposition, passion requires effort, discipline and therefore suffering. In some ways the same applies to sociability, often assisted by mood-enhancers less explicit than an actual medicine. Who has never had a drink to quell their nerves before facing a public gathering?<sup>9</sup>

In some areas the tyranny of positivity is more evident than in others: think for example of the retail sector, where courtesy is a must. One wonders whether tech-

<sup>9</sup> Conversely, the absence of passion and engagement can be seen as a menace to the status quo, as William Davies suggests: "What if the greatest threat to capitalism, at least in the liberal West, is simply lack of enthusiasm and activity? What if, rather than inciting violence or explicit refusal, contemporary capitalism is simply met with a yawn?"



nical skills aren't gradually shifting into the background, overwhelmingly obscured by social and emotional abilities, part of the so-called soft skills. In this regard, Barbara Ehrenreich claims that "we have become the emotional wallpaper in other people's lives, less individuals with our own quirks and needs than dependable sources of smiles and optimism". Some theorists include this phenomenon in a broader process of 'feminisation of labour', given that some typical features of care work traditionally done by women define the tasks of salaried work in general today. Angela McRobbie goes further and claims that "the gender of Post-Fordism is female". In the so-called creative industries (art, design but also journalism and architecture), in which the ability to network is fundamental, *níceness* represents an absolute value that is rarely made explicit.<sup>10</sup> Niceness lies in the sphere of affability and cordiality. Niceness helps to smooth the way between individuals, it is less formal than politeness but still respectful. At the same time, it expresses enthusiasm and passion, without showing any sense of rivalry. Niceness hides the strategic competitiveness underlying the system of entrepreneurial values behind a veil of bland courtesy (originally 'nice' meant silly or unaware).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, the concept of the creative industries is extremely broad and therefore inevitably vague. The UK Department of Culture, Media and Sports includes nine sectors related to the creative industries: advertising and marketing; architecture; crafts; design: product, graphics and fashion; film, tv, video, radio and photography; computer science, software and computers; publishing; museums, galleries and bookstores; music, performance and visual arts.

<sup>11</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild points out that the performance of emotional labour is deeply gendered: generally speaking, men are urged to display confidence and directness (debt collector mode), while women are required to master the art of status enhancement or, in other words, niceness (flight attendant mode). However, some emergent management philosophies are challenging the traditionally feminine prescription of niceness. Among them is Radical Candor, which combines honesty and care. Radical Candor was conceived by former Google and Apple executive Kim Scott.

To confirm the obligation to be *nice*, we will turn our attention briefly to the world of graphic design, a profession that has been ‘diluted’ following the democratisation of desktop publishing software and the skills they require. British designer Anthony Burrill created a poster particularly popular with graphic designers which later became a real icon. The poster shows a black and white letterpress that reads “Work Hard & Be Nice to People” in a font that gives it a sense of authenticity and frankness. Hinting at the idea that niceness has been put to work, Burrill’s poster, which generated countless unauthorised copies for sale on Etsy, anticipated the social propaganda of coworking spaces and gentrified cafés. One of the most popular design blogs is called It’s Nice That, while the motto of the DesignerNews.com online forum is “Be nice. Or else”.<sup>12</sup> One might consider happiness as the fuel that makes niceness run. Besides holding numerous conferences on the topic of happiness, Stefan Sagmeister and Jessica Walsh, a designer duo known for their controversial work, created The Happy Show, an exhibition that “offers visitors the experience of walking into Stefan Sagmeister’s mind as he attempts to increase his happiness via meditation, cognitive therapy, and mood-altering pharmaceuticals”.<sup>13</sup>

Going back to the subject of coworking, according to Arvidsson negative energy becomes a demon to be exorcised:

<sup>12</sup> This injunction can also be interpreted as an attempt to create a safe space for the forum’s users.

<sup>13</sup> The obligation to be nice and passionate somehow recalls the “organization of enthusiasm”, as author Roberto Calasso calls it, of fascist regimes, but with a crucial difference: today there is no central authority, the enthusiastic imperative is now decentralised.

The obligation to create positive affectivity is deeply rooted in the habitus of the co-workers themselves: one has to behave in a certain way, manage one's emotions (it's not done to seem overly depressed due to, for example, being out of work, or to talk about certain topics (work related subjects are alright; personal ones, beyond a certain limit, less acceptable). Above all it is important not to create negative energy. The fact that one's own ability to create positive affectivity needs to be nurtured daily, as a source of reputational value, means that socialising among co-workers hardly ever becomes collective and supportive: one does not form a community with values greater than the single, but one co-creates a series of experiences in which the single can find confirmation of their identity as a co-worker.

Martha Rosler asks: "Why are people being so nice?". The context is that of art, where work and public relations are very closely related. Rosler goes on to argue, with rueful sarcasm, that "being thrilled is the main business of the art world", and notes that the way of communicating, both orally and in writing, seem more suited to the tones of a Victorian court, concealing the hierarchies and power relations that characterise it. Rather than courtesy, what we are witnessing is *courtliness*. As an ironic take on the abuse of expressions of affection in online communication, the writer Joanne McNeil has created a browser plugin that allows you to automatically brighten up the tone of your emails. What do these projects and the somewhat critical observations show? That niceness and enthusiasm are the lingua franca of art, design and the creative indus-

tries in general.<sup>14</sup> And whoever does not speak the language is destined to remain an outsider.<sup>15</sup>

For Byung-Chul Han, when the subject ceases to consider himself as such and becomes a project, they resort to positivity to improve results. To Han it is an act of self-imposed violence because expressing positivity means carrying out a constant exercise of self-analysis and monitoring in order to find and suppress negativity. However, this exercise has serious limits because rather than producing meaning it generates the mere accumulation of states of mind. It therefore becomes impossible to construct a self-narrative, and to produce an autobiography. The discipline of the subject-turned-project is not unlike that of the Protestant doctrine: "Now, instead of searching out sins, one hunts down negative thoughts," comments Han. Yet according to the philosopher it is precisely the negativity that keeps alive what is alive. While often referring to Foucault's concept of entrepreneur of the self, Han emphasises the importance of the negative, specifying the difference between the various ways it is expressed. For example, Han distinguishes fear from anxiety: fear is directed towards a specific object, whilst anxiety is generalised. And it is this generalised anxiety that stimulates frenetic entrepreneurial activity. Yet anxiety is the feeling that best represents the future of the precariat. It can therefore be said that by giving value to the negative, Han legitimises the expression of sad passions that only a precarious point of view is able to articulate.

<sup>14</sup> Canadian designer and researcher Michèle Champagne calls this self-congratulatory, upbeat and uncritical art & design culture "the likedy-like mafia".

<sup>15</sup> Displays of niceness and passion might be included in the reasons why it is so difficult for creative workers to talk about money. A dry reminder of a late payment might contrast too much with the enthusiastic communication that preceded it.

## **What You Think Is What You Feel**

As in a complex system of communicating vessels, the negativity that is pushed away and stigmatised reappears elsewhere, sometimes in pathological forms: depression and anxiety disorder grow around the world. According to the World Health Organisation, it is nothing short of an epidemic. Between 1990 and 2013, the number of people suffering from anxiety and depression has doubled, reaching 10% of the global population, a situation that also has profound economic effects that amount to 1 trillion dollars a year in losses. How can the situation be dealt with? Rather than acting on the environmental conditions that contribute to the spread of these mental disorders, the aim is often to intervene on an individual level, ignoring or even denying their social dimension. This way the mind becomes a battlefield where various therapeutic strategies are applied. Among these is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which is based on the idea that it is possible to modify the interpretation of events and personal contingencies, and shape the mood accordingly. This is not dissimilar from the deep acting described by Arlie Russell Hochschild who often noticed how a specific feeling is actively provoked through a reinterpretation of events.

Since CBT can be put into practice without the supervision of a therapist, it is the basis for many online apps and services. Among these is MoodGym, a kind of interactive self-help manual aimed at preventing and combating anxiety and depression. In use for 15 years now and developed by the Australian National University, the service is available in various languages and its benefits are widely documented. The sports metaphor in the name of the app is hardly a coincidence: not only the body but also the mind must now be trained. MoodGym illustrates its philosophy through a very simple scheme

along the lines of a well-known IT slogan: WYTIWYF (What You Think Is What You Feel). The model is circular: external events generate thoughts that in turn provoke feelings; the latter produce behaviours and behaviours then influence the outside world by determining new events. By acting on thoughts, the link between events and feelings, it is possible to improve one's humour. Unlike classical psychotherapy, CBT is purely functional and empirical, thus experimental. Originally started to alleviate depression, it is nowadays also used by people wanting to kick the habit of smoking or gambling.

References to computer science, like that of MoodGym, are frequent in self-help manuals. One of these is *Mind Hacking*, written by Sir John Hargrave in 2015, which asks the following question: "Have you ever wished you could reprogram your brain, just as a hacker would a computer?". One might think the association between mind and computers is a product of the pervasiveness of the internet and digital devices. Although these elements are more than likely to have contributed, the first self-help book to capitalise on the aura of computer rationality dates back to 1960. Like its successors, *Psycho-Cybernetics* proposes a sort of mental cosmetics aimed at embellishing oneself and what is around us. Fittingly, the author Maxwell Maltz was a cosmetic surgeon. The reference to cybernetics suggests that the self must be seen as a machine to be corrected and optimised. But since it is *self* help, it is oneself that must intervene, and this is why a mechanistic view of the mind requires a dissociative effort, an estrangement as Hochschild calls it. Likewise, mindfulness techniques allow those who practice them to detach from themselves in order to 'visualize' thoughts and feelings without making any judgment of them. In this case the individual is forced to internalise the strict non-management of their men-

tal activity. Sometimes these practices are advertised as a remedy for the stress caused by multitasking and the fatigue of digital interaction, which are some of the symptoms that characterise the daily routine of the entrepreneurial self. Mindfulness often comes in the form of an app for the mobile phone,<sup>16</sup> which can be further characterised as *pharmakon*: both remedy and poison. The latter is the stress of productivity while the former is mindful relaxation.

## Fail Better

In recent years a collective praise of failure has taken hold and has even given life to dedicated formats. Among these is FailCon, a series of conferences where different startupper meet to share each other's failures and learn from them. At first glance, this phenomenon appears to run counter to the imperative of positivity: what could be worse than failure? In truth, the defence of failure represents the umpteenth confirmation of colonisation of the real by optimism. The idea, first widespread in business and then in popular culture, is that failure should be seen as a temporary phase that's useful — not to say necessary — to one's future success. The invitation is to consider failure, just like crisis, as an opportunity or at least as something that shouldn't be stigmatised. Samuel Beckett is often cited: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better". Out of context, this passage seems like an incitement to give the best of oneself and not to surrender at the first hurdle. It is not surprising then that it appeared in productivity guru Tim Ferriss's bestseller *The 4-Hour Workweek*. As Ned Beauman explains in *The New Inquiry*, the motto has become the literary equivalent of the well-known portrait of Che Guevara: an autonomous brand stamped on t-shirts,

<sup>16</sup> Among these apps, the most popular one is probably Headspace.

cups, posters, arms and shoulders. Yet it is not easy to imagine a less optimistic author than Beckett. The passage, which appeared in the cryptic 1983 novella *Worstward Ho*, reflects the author's placid cynicism: since we are going to fail, we might as well do it with dignity.

## Sneeze

At the base of cognitive behavioural therapy and positive thinking is the implicit idea that we should decode thoughts rather than the facts which cause these thoughts to emerge. When this perspective becomes commonplace, it turns into an elaborate entrepreneurial 'fake it till you make it'. When faced with a negative event, one has to convince oneself that negativity is inner and therefore, through a simple reinterpretation of the facts, it is possible to get rid of one's worries. Denial of reality is only a step away from this. A hyper-optimistic common sense, when mixed with cognitive-behavioural philosophy, starts to resemble a form of soft solipsism. It recalls the Objectivism of Ayn Rand, a thinker highly appreciated in the entrepreneurial sphere but often mocked in the philosophical one. The extreme individualism championed by Rand leads to a rejection of the world. When interviewed about the death of her husband, by now elderly herself, she declared: "I will not die. It's the world that will end".

*The Futurological Congress* is a short science fiction novel by Stanisław Lem. The Polish writer describes a society whose members are constantly under the influence of psychotropic drugs and therefore convinced they live a hedonistically perfect life and are the protagonists of a successful utopia. The reality, however, is very different, made up as it is of frost, misery, rags and disease. The only clue to the truth is the fact that the inhabitants of this seemingly perfect world sneeze



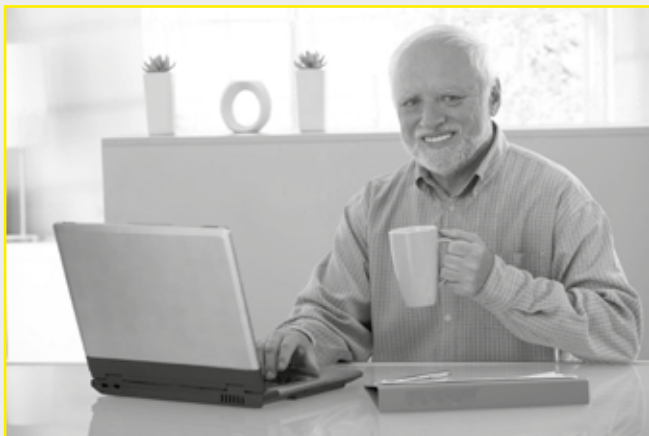
continuously. The effects of hallucinogens in the novel echo the remodeling of one's mind that positive thinking demands. But what about sneezing? That is, what happens when the signs of reality become more and more evident, until the spell is broken? Let's try to understand it through two apparently unrelated stories.

If it is true that entrepreneurs are optimistic by nature, it may be because they more or less consciously adopt strategies similar to CBT, such as positive self-talk and the replacement of negative thoughts. Consider the testimony of Jody Sherman, the energetic founder of a start-up dedicated to selling products for children. According to Sherman, "it doesn't even occur to [entrepreneurs], it doesn't even come into [their] thinking that [they] could possibly fail". What was his recipe for reviving the fortunes of the economy? To prevent the newspapers from giving negative news so as to inject confidence in the public. "You kind of alter reality for a while for yourself and then ultimately it becomes reality," the entrepreneur explained. But sometimes things get really bad and optimism becomes cruel, to quote the title of a successful book by Lauren Berlant.<sup>17</sup> A few months after the interview, Jody's start-up failed due to serious financial losses, and when the weight of reality became overwhelming, the middle-aged entrepreneur took his own life.

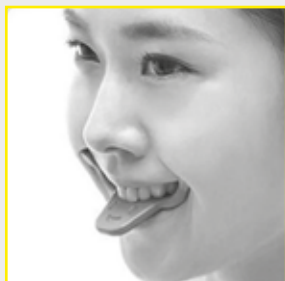
It was once again the reality game that decided the fate of Michele, a 30-year-old graphic designer who committed suicide in 2017, after leaving an open letter later published by a local newspaper. According to his parents, who decided to make their son's last words

<sup>17</sup> According to Berlant, optimism can become cruel. This happens when "the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving [...]"

public, precarity killed Michele. In the letter, Michele explained how there are no objective criteria for measuring despair, that the sense of precariousness is relative. Michele failed to “give himself” a meaning and a purpose. His reality was simply wrong and he didn’t belong there. “The future will be a disaster I don’t want to see” — warned Michele. Suicide has therefore become a way to escape the blackmail of a reality that doesn’t feel real at all. Michele survived by making “malaise an art”, an expression that well embodies the drama of a precarious multitude, forced to conceal their torments, at least superficially. Both Jody, who embodies the entrepreneurial spirit, and Michele, who symbolises the dilemmas of precarity, were against reality. While the former tried to deny it, the latter chose to reject it.



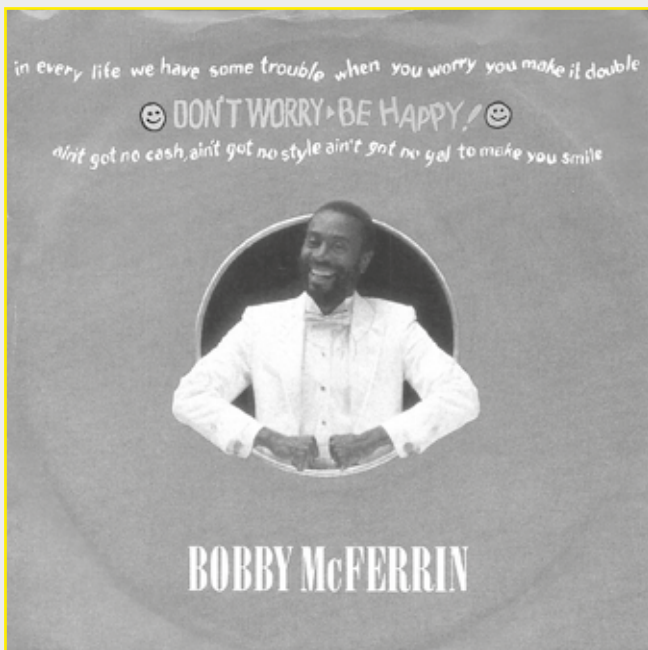
Hide the Pain Harold, a stock photography model turned into a meme. As described by the humour website Sad and Useless, “Harold struggles daily to not let his inner pain show. . . but the smile can only hide so much.” Whereas San Precario is the patron saint of the precariat, Harold is tutelary deity of the entreprecariat.



Tool for improving and naturalising smile on a muscular level, an approach that can be defined as surface acting, following Arlie Russell Hochschild's terminology.



Letterpress poster signed by the designer Anthony Burrill.



Cover of Bobby McFerrin's single *Don't Worry, Be Happy!*, 1988. The severe feel-goodness of the song led to an internet rumour being spread that claimed the singer had committed suicide. The dark undertones of the song are also present in its video, where we see McFerrin himself jumping out of a window after a financial meltdown.

# MIND HACKING

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR  
MIND FOR GOOD IN 21 DAYS



SIR JOHN HARGRAVE

Cover of *Mind Hacking: How to Change Your Mind for Good in 21 Days* by Sir John Hargrave, published in 2016.



FailCon conference logo depicting a bounce-back toy.



HBR.ORG

# Harvard Business Review



APRIL 2011

48 Understanding Failure  
A Playbook for  
Learning from Failure  
Amy C. Edmondson

84 Learning from Failure  
Former P&G CEO  
A.G. Lafley: "I Think of  
My Failures as a Gift"

100 Recovering from Failure  
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## THE FAILURE

HOW TO UNDERSTAND IT, LEARN FROM IT, AND RECOVER FROM IT

### ISSUE

Harvard Business Review issue dedicated to failure, April 2011.



*Tear Gun* by designer Yi-Fei Chen, 2016. Human tears become the bullets of a steampunk-like pistol. The project can be read as an invitation to express, or even weaponise, one's 'sad passions'. Copyright: Design Academy Eindhoven. Photo: Ronald Smits.



Limited edition slides created in 2015 by artist Cory Arcangel in collaboration with Bravado.

# III. platforms

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**ONCE THE INTERNET  
CHANGED THE WORLD;  
NOW THE WORLD IS  
CHANGING THE INTERNET.**

**Geert Lovink**

This chapter is dedicated to life on the internet, which corresponds less and less to the ideals embodied in the historic Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace made in 1996 in Davos by John Perry Barlow, author of the lyrics of the Grateful Dead and an activist for digital rights. The declaration was aimed at keeping the internet an autonomous environment, free from the constraints of any traditional form of government. Today, more than twenty years later, the internet serves mainly as an appendix to the new bureaucracies citizen-users are subjected to: filling out forms, classifying emails, carrying out public relations, seeking work, working, promoting work, and complaining about work. Rather than offering a refuge from the entrepreneurial logic, digital environments often amplify its dynamics. Rather than a shelter from the government, the internet is a practice ground for self-government. This chapter includes a series of accounts concerning online platforms where the relationship between entrepreneurialism and precarisation processes is central. Another aspect that unites the different platforms is that their effectiveness is proportional to the creativity with which they are used; where creativity is understood as a resource to distinguish oneself from other competitor-users. The study confirms the vivid image conjured up by philosopher Paolo Virno and cited by Pascal Gielen that “art has been diluted in society like a soluble tablet in a glass of water”. In other words, the peculiarity of creative work has been dissolved in general work.

The following accounts involve different aspects, including the rhetoric of the interfaces, the modes of interaction and the historical development of the platforms. Besides the ‘technical’ perspective is another that focuses on advertising campaigns, on the value system of the respective founders, and on user experience.

The platforms analysed are LinkedIn, the professional networking service; Fiverr, the largest online marketplace for freelance services; and GoFundMe, a crowdfunding platform specialised in raising money for personal needs. Why talk about platforms rather than simply digital services? In IT language a platform is a technical structure upon which new products and services can be built. In this case, talking about platforms means highlighting the fact that through their services they offer a base on which different narrative, rhetorical and ideological levels grow and interact. The way the platforms are used implies a specific worldview of which the interfaces make up the surface.

Among the most widespread social media, LinkedIn is the one with the least appeal. It's dull, administrative, aseptic; in one word: corporate. So why talk about it, at a time when Facebook itself is losing grip on Generation Z and the Millennials? Because LinkedIn — or rather the LinkedIn that was — is revealing: the frank competitive drive that it embodies illuminates some of the dynamics that characterise social media in general. So I kept the following portrait of LinkedIn unchanged, written just before the drastic redesign that turned the social media privileged by professionals into a facsimile of Facebook, borrowing its convivial rhetoric and cutesy illustrations, thus contributing to a general infantilisation of web interfaces.<sup>1</sup> This propensity to what is already obsolete is also an attempt to escape, at least at an analytical level, from a “permanent beta” existence, promoted not by chance by Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn.

In the last few years, much has been written on the Facebook Like Economy, on the grassroots origin of the Twitter hashtag and on the narcissistic component of Instagram. During this period, LinkedIn has been almost completely ignored. In the *Social Media Reader*, published in 2012, it is not even mentioned once. In the *Unlike Us Reader*, published the year after and which focused on possible alternatives, LinkedIn appears five times, but only as a fleeting example. After all, what is the usefulness of LinkedIn, an online professional network mostly known for its spammy email techniques? Within the creative industries, while most people apparently have an account, no one seems to actually use

<sup>1</sup> In this regard, consider the ‘toyish’ brand image of Google and the name of the holding company to which it belongs: Alphabet.

it. There, as a communication tool, it is mainly experienced in a passive way. Not to mention how the stories of jobs obtained through this social have the flavour of myth and legend. However, when one is faced with unemployment, a glossy portfolio may not be enough anymore. I experienced it myself when, as soon as I started to feel anxious about my job situation, I religiously followed LinkedIn's automatic suggestions to improve my profile. Creative workers approach LinkedIn with the same skepticism that they have towards the bureaucratic strictness of the Europass curriculum vitae format, yet the platform provides a feeble hope in times of job searching despair.

Does the abundance of doubts on its actual usefulness make LinkedIn irrelevant? Is the daily use of an online platform the only indicator of its cultural significance? Regardless of its supposed ineffectiveness, LinkedIn subtly reminds us of the pervasive regime of both online and away-from-keyboard professional networking. In a series of modified vignettes, graphic designer Frank Chimero shows that the standard LinkedIn invitation — "Hi, I'd like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn" — might function as a universal caption for The New Yorker's cartoons. In Chimero's appropriations we see individuals who pronounce such a promotional exhortation in any kind of context, addressing anyone (we see for example a man at the foot of his bed begging the Lord to add him to His contacts). These revised cartoons are poignant because we instinctively recognise, not without a taste of bitterness, the way in which professional networking permeates our lives. In this perspective, the very existence of LinkedIn appears paradoxical, since it assures us that work and life are distinct spheres. Interviewed by Forbes, Jeff Weiner, CEO of the company, stated that 80% of LinkedIn users



want to keep their personal and professional lives separate. LinkedIn is thus more than a series of networked résumés. It functions both as a symbol and a platform that displays, enacts and somehow exacerbates the social dynamics of work ethic and, as Chimero shows, lends itself to embodying the anxious pressures that derive from it.

### **“Your Parents’ Network”**

Preceding Facebook by one year, LinkedIn was founded in 2003 by Reid Hoffman together with some colleagues from Social Net and PayPal. During the last thirteen years, 450 million users signed up for LinkedIn, a third of Facebook’s user base. As the technology writer Evelyn Rusli points out in the Wall Street Journal, LinkedIn was seen as “the ugly duckling of social media” by investors because of its hybrid business model, and as “your mom’s or your dad’s network” by users, probably due to its corporate allure. However, things have changed in the last few years. Not only have more young professionals joined it, but, as Jeff Weiner explained during a conference, users now tend to keep their profile constantly updated, rather than adding new experiences only when looking for a job. One could say that this shift, instead of representing a deeper commitment to the platform, merely reflects the extreme flexibility and the demand for relentless improvement that these young professionals have to face.

LinkedIn’s mission to “connect the world’s professionals to make them more productive and successful”, is accompanied by an ambitious vision for the future that is epitomised by the company’s Economic Graph. The idea is simple: LinkedIn wants to create and manage the profile of each of the estimated three billion members of the global workforce, together with the profiles

of every existing company, every available job, every required skill, and every institution that can provide these skills. Presented as a response to the steady rise of unemployment, the Economic Graph renders any kind of relationship as an economic exchange between economic agents. One could say that it visually embodies the neoliberal paradigm.

The Economic Graph does not exclude the field of education, one of the areas in which the influence of the economic reason is most evident. While knowledge is repackaged as 'skills', learning becomes an *investment* that takes the form of an economic exchange, sometimes in a brutally literal sense as almost seven-in-ten 2013 college graduates had taken a student loan in the United States. As Franco 'Bifo' Berardi puts it (too emphatically, one must say), "for young people taking out loans in order to study [...] debt functions like a symbolic chain whose effects are more powerful than the real metal chains used in slavery." As a result of this symbolic chain, students "will have to start working immediately after graduation, in order to pay back a never ending amount of money [accepting] any condition of work, any exploitation, any humiliation, in order to pay the loan." Here's where LinkedIn comes in handy: LinkedIn Students is an app that connects students to job opportunities. The promise of this Tinder-styled tool is to jump the humiliation part in order to directly obtain a meaningful job. It comes as no surprise then that one of the anonymous students quoted when the app was launched was particularly concerned about loans: "I am graduating with \$35,000 of debt so landing a good first job out of college is extremely important to me." As it is often the case in the field of innovation, LinkedIn capitalises on a dramatic social problem and addresses it with a user-friendly and apparently trivial technical

solution, implementing the optimism of the American dream in its promotional jingle:

From graduation, to a corporation, some adulation, and eventually some serious relaxation.

### **“All Human Beings Are Entrepreneurs”**

It is possible to trace the principles that informed the creation of LinkedIn and guide its evolving design. Helped by entrepreneur Ben Casnocha, Reid Hoffman, currently LinkedIn Executive Chairman, outlined his views on society in a self-help book aptly entitled *The Start-Up of You*. The aim of the book is to help professionals advance their careers by thinking of themselves as start-up companies. This proposition derives from what the authors call a revelation: “The conditions in which entrepreneurs start and grow companies are the conditions we *all* now live in when fashioning a career”. “Now the escalator is jammed at every level”, Hoffman warns, and it’s the job of each single worker to invest in themselves. A sense of doom surrounds this narrative: “if you fail to adapt, no one — not your employer, not the government — is going to catch you when you fall.”

The book opens with the quote from Muhammad Yunus discussed earlier: “All human beings are entrepreneurs”. Entrepreneurialism is here characterised as a state of nature, a primordial urge, an instinct that emerges from the frustration of untapped opportunities. Not only is entrepreneurship coded in human DNA, but it is also a universal common. It was after traveling from rural Indonesia to Colombia, that the authors could serenely conclude that “entrepreneurship is a *life* idea, not a strictly business one; a *global* idea, not a strictly American one.” However, in the book there is no trace of the deductive character of these findings. The model that the authors

have in mind casts the reality that they experience. For them the world is there to be read in terms of investments, risks, and opportunities, as if it were a giant Monopoly game. The emphasis on personal responsibility and entrepreneurial spirit culminates with the glorification of entrepreneurs in the strict sense: freewheeling individuals who “deal with uncertainties and changes”, “take stock of their assets, aspirations, and the market realities” and “aggressively seek and create breakout opportunities”.

A New York Times best seller, *The Start-Up of You* is fundamentally a reboot of the notion of personal branding elucidated in the influential article by Tom Peters entitled *The Brand Called You* and published in 1997.<sup>2</sup> The main difference between the two is that while Peters takes inspiration from big corporations, Hoffman looks at start-ups (that is, basically, his own enterprises and the ones of his peers). The parallels are frequent nevertheless. For instance, Peters maintains that one should reinvent themselves on a regular basis, and Hoffman, borrowing from the IT field, calls the same approach “permanent beta”. The universality of entrepreneurialism echoes the democratic promise of personal branding with Peters assuring us that “everyone has a chance to stand out”. Both Peters and Hoffman give a new, positive spin to the Foucauldian notion of enterprise-unit. In 1979, Michel Foucault described the re-emergence of the so called *homo oeconomicus* in a novel fashion. The innate or acquired abilities — both physical and intellectual — of this new version of the *homo oeconomicus* are converted into human capital, therefore he behaves

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman and Peters are certainly not the only ones to advance the analogy of life as a commercial enterprise. Among others are William Bridges, author of *Creating & Co.: Learn to Think Like the CEO of Your Own Career* (1998), and Christopher Gergen and Gregg Vanourek, authors of *Life Entrepreneurs: Ordinary People Creating Extraordinary Lives* (2008).

as “an entrepreneur of himself [...] being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.”

### **“Let Opportunities Come to You”**

LinkedIn represents the ideal platform to test the exercises proposed by Peters and Hoffman to become a brand and a startup, respectively. Its user experience emphasises the demand of constantly improving one's profile, which ideally should be a melange of personal values and professional achievements. *Is your profile up-to-date? What does it say about the causes you care about? Have you ever volunteered for an organization? Who are the public figures you're influenced by? Did you ever win an award?* As stated in a promotional video, LinkedIn is “a CV that never sleeps”, that shares any update with your network by default and that will eventually reward you with an All-Star badge. A recently implemented functionality allows users to be endorsed for a specific skill by other users. These recommendations constitute what can be informally called an ‘endorsement tapestry’, a term that can be found on websites selling fake endorsements. Similarly to Facebook Likes, endorsements not only serve the purpose of acknowledging skills, but in the context of LinkedIn they are a performative means of silently expressing the hope of a transactional mutuality: “I endorsed you, will you endorse me too?”

Tutorials for profile improvement proliferate, some of them produced by LinkedIn itself. They populate a market for professional self-help which includes titles like *From Linked Out to LinkedIn: Unlocking the Power for Career Success*. One of the primary tactics of an effective LinkedIn strategy concerns the profile picture: “your face should occupy at least 60% of the frame”, “be seri-

ous but not gloomy”, and other tips like these abound. In a tutorial meant for recruiters, one of the suggestions is to “exude approachability”. The saccharine quantification of social skills portrayed in Black Mirror’s *Nosedive* episode doesn’t seem that distant. Is there anything new about this? Everybody knows that it’s important to dress properly for a job interview. But the job interview is now permanent, and a professional demeanor (whatever this means) is permanently required. Social life thus becomes like an elevator pitch in a skyscraper with infinite floors.

### **“Wonder How You Rank Against Your Peers?”**

According to Peters, your career is now “a checkerboard. Or even a maze.” This might be the reason why LinkedIn feels the need to artificially reconstruct the verticality of a ladder through a unique ranking system based on profile views. Literal even in terms of interface design, the competitive dimension of career building is represented as a vertical list. With a free account, users have access to their top ten most-viewed connections and the ones just next to them, in the context of their whole network, their own company, or among professionals in the same field. This ranking system has a two-fold function: it is framed as valuable information sold to premium users while it exhorts the others to put effort into the curation of their profiles. This is a unique feature among social media as with Facebook or Twitter one can only deduct the popularity of other users from the quantity of Likes, Shares and Retweets. And this feature is not the only one: LinkedIn allows users to know who looks at their profile. And, as shown by David Veldt, this form of voyeurism is predominantly oriented towards “young, attractive women”. Here, we catch a glimpse of the indirect usefulness of LinkedIn. The fact that we can’t perceive the same phenomenon on generalist

social media doesn't mean that it is not taking place, so LinkedIn's *utilitarian transparency* helps us to formulate general questions on social media usage and how they influence the perception of professional advancement. As Geoff Shullenberger points out, one of the reasons why Peter Thiel, the controversial PayPal founder, originally financed Facebook is because it is informed by a favourite theory of his: René Girard's mimetic theory of human social life. Put simply, Girard claimed that humans desire things because other humans desire them. Desire therefore becomes triangular as it involves an object of desire, a subject who desires the object and another subject who imitates the first one. It's easy to see how Facebook, through Likes and Reactions, materialises signals of desire; which then allows it to, at least partially, shape desire itself. Together with the "I'd like to add you..." one, there's another type of email frequently sent by LinkedIn. The formula is the following: "Congratulate X on the new job". Each time that my peers update their position, I'm notified about that and therefore urged to respond. I'm presented with a desirable achievement that I should congratulate for, and so I'm asked to materialise my signal of desire. These requests don't take into account the current professional status of the receiver, so it is worth asking what are the effects of such kind of spam when someone is having trouble landing a job and other people's success is one click away.

### **"Know How You Compare to the Competition"**

Is LinkedIn so different from Facebook? Social media are generally understood as platforms that enable, facilitate, or amplify interpersonal communication. But besides this fundamental function, social media also foster the entrepreneurial management of a personal brand whose effectiveness is constantly measured and

ranked. Nowadays, analysing the Facebook profile of candidates before hiring them is a matter of common sense. Furthermore, Facebook portrays users as “enterprise-units” since the layout of a personal account has the same appearance as that of a company or brand. It wasn’t like this some years ago, when the Facebook profile of a user resembled a standard CV while the one of a brand, with its cover image, looked like an advertising space — an idea starts to emerge that companies don’t have their own résumés, so maybe it’s the CV itself that is becoming an insufficient tool to promote one’s self-enterprise. The anxiety that comes from this uncertainty permeates all social media but we tend to neglect it in favour of concepts such as community and sharing. Ultimately, the individual dimension of social media is denied, as are the pressures suffered by the user as an individual, and paradoxically isolated, human being.

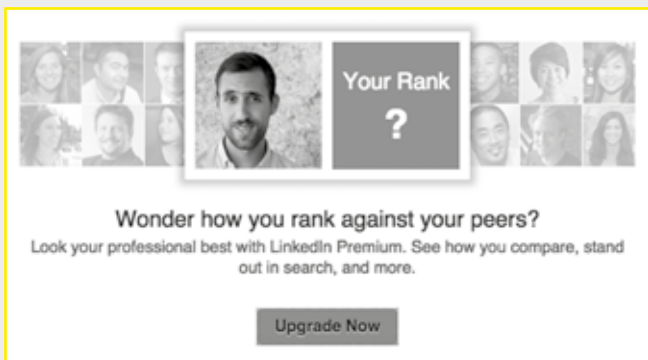
In December 2016 LinkedIn was acquired by Microsoft for \$26.2 billion in cash, one of the biggest deals in tech history. It comes as no surprise that Microsoft promised to preserve LinkedIn’s brand, culture and independence, but nobody knows exactly what will happen. Microsoft could turn LinkedIn into something completely different, removing its salient aspects in order to refresh its atmosphere.

That would be a pity. When Facebook informally asks “What’s on your mind?”, it doesn’t only allow users to share feelings and thoughts, it also captures data that can be rationally analysed in a way that can’t be easily inferred from the original question. Sociologist William Davies compares this ambiguous surveying process to the method employed to study a focus group. A one-way mirror is used to observe the subjects, who are placed in a comfortable environment that fosters

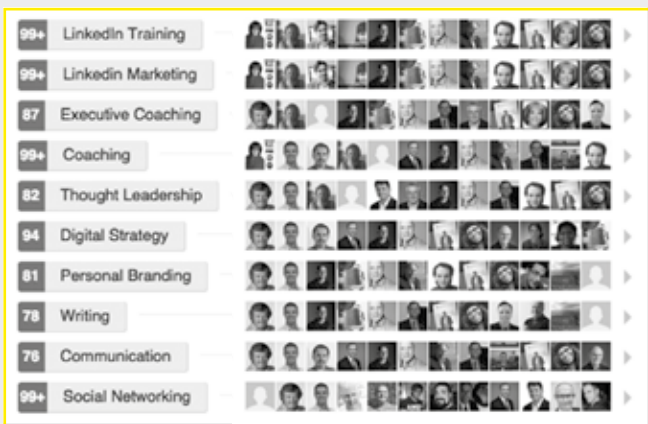


conviviality. While the subjects socialise, useful information is seamlessly collected. This method is particularly successful when the subjects don't realise that the data collection is taking place. Counterintuitively, informality fosters inaccessibility. According to Davies, "social media's new forms of emotional language can save the user from having to find a more objective or dispassionate perspective". This is why LinkedIn's outspokenness is valuable: it explicitly shows some dynamics that appear on other social platforms in a sweetened manner, yet they are carried out behind the scenes in a brutally rational way.

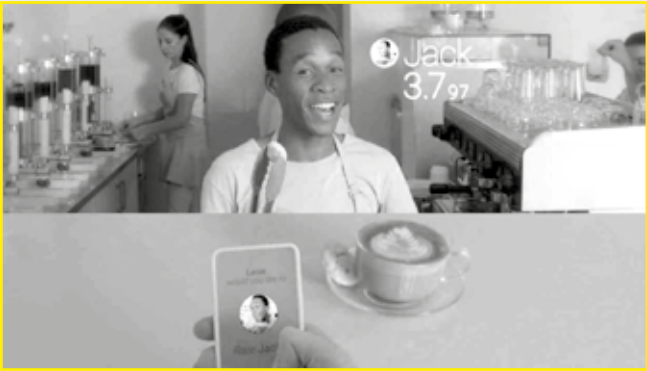
Deliberately incarnating the collective obsession with work, competition and success, LinkedIn makes users a bit more aware of it. When the ranking system is so visible, they might start to question whether it is actually significant. This distrust, already involving LinkedIn's spammy messages, makes it a goofy mascot to make fun of for things that we are dead serious about. As the ironic reactions to LinkedIn's professional spam show, such distrust is plausible. Unfortunately, however, the cute illustrations typical of Facebook are coming: the "rhetorical shift towards conviviality" that Davies talks about is already happening for LinkedIn. It's time to get ready because soon we'll have to look for work by sending sparkling animated stickers to our future bosses.



Pop-up window on LinkedIn.




So-called endorsement tapestry on LinkedIn.



Fictional social credit system in *Nosedive*, an episode of British TV series *Black Mirror*, 2016.

Face


70/100



Smile

BAD


>



Jawline

PERFECT

>



Squinch

OKAY


>

Smile

You're not really smiling at all. A smile can do wonders for people's perception of your photo, so give it a try! You have a slight laughing smile (gap between your rows of teeth), which is not ideal. Keep showing off your teeth, but close your jaw more. Your smile is pretty much flat - raise the corners of your mouth.

More information

In short, smiles are good, so don't be too serious. Based on the evidence, the ideal business photo smile needs to strike a good balance. Teeth should be showing, and the corners of the mouth should be pointing up. But don't go too far - a laughing smile (where there is a gap between your teeth) can be a bad thing in a business context.



Snappr, a web app that evaluates a user's LinkedIn profile picture and gives tips on how to improve it.



*"Hi, I'd like to add you to my  
professional network on LinkedIn."*

New Yorker cartoon modified by graphic designer Frank Chimero, who has replaced the original caption with the standard LinkedIn invite. Original cartoon: J. B. Handelsman.

up on Chicago's North Shore. He started playing hockey when he was six. His mother protested: "It's a contact sport." "Life is a contact sport!" his father said. The elder Cohen was from Bensonhurst and often told mythic tales of roughneck roller hockey. He also talked about a long-defunct professional team called the Brooklyn Americans: the Amerks. Puckheads speak of the so-

By then, they were managed and coached by a fiery former player named Mervyn (Red) Dutton. With Dwyer in prison for tax evasion, the N.H.L. had taken over the team. Resentful of the Rangers, Dutton renamed the team the Brooklyn Americans, urged the players to live in Brooklyn, and began planning an arena on Fort Greene Place. They

New York the fled League including known "Bobby had roller had after reas on East spent m descend of the S Research membe Dutton to the o He'd be Dar a firm j picious ttered o den, M coache pecting He no live on golf co of the tions t a guy



*"Hi, I'd like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn."*

A cartoon with Chimero's universal LinkedIn caption included in the actual New Yorker magazine.



Chat stickers on LinkedIn.



Adapt to the Future,  
Invest in Yourself,  
and Transform Your Career

# the start-up of



Reid Hoffman

cofounder and chairman of **LinkedIn**

— and —

Ben Casnocha

Cover of *The Start-up of You* by Reid Hoffman (co-founder of LinkedIn) and Ben Casnocha, published in 2012.

"The place for people to share things they're willing to do for \$5". This is how Fiverr.com introduced itself in 2010, both intriguing and challenging its users. At the time, it might have seemed like a social experiment created specifically to stimulate the voyeuristic appetites of the web. Instead, in the space of a few years Fiverr has become the largest online marketplace for freelance services all around the globe. The site is now among the 100 most popular in the United States and among the 200 most popular in the world. Founded in Tel Aviv by Micha Kaufman and Shai Wininger, it also has offices in New York, Chicago, Miami, and San Francisco and coordinates nearly one million transactions a month.

Today Fiverr welcomes us with an invitation to pragmatism ("Don't just dream, do") and offers us freelancing services for the lean entrepreneur. What services are they? If you can imagine it, it's probably there on Fiverr. Do you need a graphic designer to create your restaurant's logo or a programmer to create its site? Are you tired of playing Fortnite alone? Want to increase your YouTube channel followers? Or even: Do you want Jesus Christ to personally send greetings to your best friend? Does your romantic relationship require a few counselling sessions? Might a fortune teller be the answer? Then, Fiverr is what you need. Besides the predictable sections dedicated to marketing or video editing, there is one called "Fun & Lifestyle". This includes some of the wildest services, from the numerous Morgan Freeman imitators to the Indian guy in a "vegetable man" costume who'll deliver any message you want. Not to mention the section dedicated to viral videos... Often introduced by general stock images, the offers in this section rely on a

dose of micro-entertainment, a bit like the old Chatroulette where, in a matter of clicks, you found yourself face to face with a random stranger who turned *to you* and started a conversation.<sup>3</sup>

The idea behind Fiverr is simple: a seller publishes a gig offer (a one-off job), a buyer buys the service and Fiverr keeps 20% of the profit. If the price is five dollars (the minimum allowed), Fiverr gets one. A small percentage also covers PayPal's commission fees. An evaluation and feedback system, similar to that of Amazon, helps buyers decide on sellers, who in turn get badges related to their services that act as both a guarantee and as access to a series of benefits. Fiverr gives a chance — or so it claims — to newcomers and rising talent as its search algorithm is programmed in such a way as to oppose a network effect that would put the commissions into the hands of just a few sellers. For those requiring high quality services, there is Fiverr Pro, a section of the site dedicated to certified professionals. This is how Fiverr tries to resolve the age-old question of the validity of practices not protected by a professional register, such as graphic design or copywriting.

## Productivising Services

Although Fiverr was founded by two people, it is Micha Kaufman, with three other startups behind him and a past as a lawyer, who waves the banner for the site. As Carmel DeAmicis explains on Pando, the fact that Kaufman helped create an online market that relocates

<sup>3</sup> Lately it seems that Fiverr is attempting to revamp its brand image by removing services that don't align with the idea of professionalism that the company wants to foster. This is how the company motivates the elimination of the services offered by the Indian Funny Guys, discussed later in this chapter: "Fiverr is consistently updating and evolving its marketplace to better suit our community and the needs of skilled freelancers and entrepreneurs across the globe. Therefore these kinds of services are unfortunately not in our editorial focus anymore and were sidelined from our marketplace."

freelance work is perfectly in line with his entrepreneurial past. Armed with an idea about a digital security product, the lawyer — who “didn’t code, but he had the vision” — came across a Russian site that offered a product similar to the one he had in mind. Shortly thereafter Kaufman founded his first start-up with someone he had never met in person, and so it was until the company was finally sold.

Subsequently, two parallel trends attracted the attention of Wininger and Kaufman, who is now the CEO of Fiverr: the increase in self-employment and that of unemployment. With 2008 not far away, the effects of what looked like a chronic crisis were there for everyone to see. For the two entrepreneurs operating in Israel, a country with hopes of becoming a start-up nation, there was clearly an opportunity to be seized. In an interview with Eric Pfeiffer for Yahoo in 2012, Kaufman stated that the idea of Fiverr was not just to connect individuals who already offer a service, but an opportunity to create new forms of employment. Given that at the time Fiverr only accepted services costing five dollars, the reaction of the interviewer was hardly surprising. He raised doubts about the economic sustainability of the work on Fiverr and noted that the site dispelled the myth that Americans (at the time the most active on the site) are not willing to work for low wages.

As soon as it was launched, Fiverr generated an immediate response from both press and users as dozens of publications, including CNN and Fox News, advertised the site by listing the strangest ways of “earning 5 bucks”. However, the first to be surprised by the quantity and variety of services were its creators. But why five dollars exactly? Although the limit has now disappeared, in it lay Fiverr’s main innovation. There was a

specific objective behind the choice of a set price for any service which was to ensure that hiring a freelancer was as easy and immediate as making a purchase on eBay, while avoiding the tedious process of estimates and negotiations. In other words, the goal was to “productivise services”. This was the whole point of the limit: the smart freelancer would then split their services up into 5-dollar sections (Kaufman talks about “slicing talent”), multiplying these for more demanding orders if necessary. For their part, the customer, attracted by the accessibility of the price (“the cost of a Frappuccino”), would not hesitate to risk the modest sum on Fiverr. The whole concept was completed by a formula that still survives today. Every gig is introduced by what looks like a line of code: *I will do X for X dollars*. The idea worked and by 2012 the platform had over 600,000 gigs. Productivisation of services is also what distinguishes Fiverr from the many competing markets based on hourly rates such as Upwork, Outsourcely or Freelancers.com. Fiverr’s effort seems to go in the direction of what Ivan Illich called radical monopoly, that is, “the substitution of an industrial product or a professional service for a useful activity in which people engage or would like to engage. A radical monopoly paralyzes autonomous action in favour of professional deliveries”.

Once a certain stability was reached (partly thanks to the 110 million dollars of financing raised in the course of several rounds) the five dollar limit was eliminated, although the name of the site still refers to the original concept. At this point, Kaufman began to define active users of Fiverr as microentrepreneurs, while celebrating the unrestricted access to labour made possible by the internet.<sup>4</sup> The co-founder therefore rejected the

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘microentrepreneur’ is often used in relation to the sharing economy. Debbie Wosskow reports the words of the UK Business and Enter-

need for local entrepreneurship by fully embracing a fluid, globalist and stateless vision of the labour market in which immediacy and the absence of friction reign supreme. “We’ve turned the labour market into an e-commerce business” said Kaufman on TechCrunch, ready to hide the notorious reserve army behind the fixed price of a commodity; never mind what Karl Marx might think.

## **Manna from Heaven**

To get some idea of who the sellers are, let us examine a common type of service — text translation — which has the advantage of offering a clear metric in the number of lines. Despite all the talk of automation and artificial intelligence, we find hundreds of human translators on Fiverr. Among those who speak Italian is Fabio (the names have been changed), 18, currently living in Finland, who for just under five euros promises to translate a text of 3000 words, revision included. He has recently joined Fiverr and is happy because in less than a month he has earned 50 euros. Fabio, who considers Fiverr a sideline, aims to earn 100-200 euros a month. Then there is Michele, a Level 2 seller, who in addition to doing translations, writes songs, plans trips to Italy, transcribes texts from audio tracks, etc.; all on Fiverr. Michele introduces himself through one of those now ubiquitous explanatory videos, in which a hand draws silhouettes on a white sheet, a cartoon he probably commissioned from some other Fiverr user. After losing his job, the translator-songwriter made Fiverr his main occupation. He considers it a reliable site despite the fake negative reviews created by the competition, and the continuous

prise Minister Matthew Hancock: “The sharing economy [is] unlocking a new generation of microentrepreneurs — people who are making money from the assets and skills they already own, from renting out a spare room through Airbnb, through working as a freelance designer through PeoplePerHour. The route to self-employment has never been easier.”

updates that sometimes damage his visibility. However, Michele complains about Fiverr's high commission and the lack of communication with the website's operators, who deny him the highest badge without giving any clear explanation for it. Finally, Clara, a translator and editor with sixteen years of experience, translates 3000 words for about 30 euros over ten days. Active on Fiverr since 2014, Clara is a level 1 seller who can boast numerous feedbacks (all positive) and several regular customers. She underlines in her profile that her translations are done manually. In addition to this service, Clara designs the layouts of books and their covers. Although Fiverr is one of her main sources of income, she complains about some risky marketplace policies for sellers. She has in fact suffered several attempts at fraud, mostly ignored by the administration. She tells us of her latest troubles with Asian competitors:

Sometimes their messages are incomprehensible and I didn't waste time answering when I was too busy. I was penalised and sent back to the first level, because now (we only find things out when we are on the receiving end) you have to respond to everyone, always, even just with an emoticon or a spamming report. Otherwise you're downgraded. It's absurd.

Despite these complications, Clara has no doubts about the value of Fiverr, and talks about it in these terms: "For us Italian translators it's manna from heaven, especially if you are forced (like me) to work from home. Otherwise we'd starve".

A broader perspective on the diverse workforces populating Fiverr is offered by Elisa Giardina Papa, an Italian artist based in the US who hired and interviewed several

gig workers for her project *Technologies of Care*, which focuses on digitally mediated care labour. Papa spoke mostly with women, both from the Global South and the Global North, such as a video performer from Brazil who bursts balloons and throws pies in her face, an ASMR<sup>5</sup> artist from the US and even a virtual boyfriend bot. The artist also met a biology professor from Venezuela who does research, homework and translations for students as well as designing nail wraps. She teamed up with her daughter, who has also a profile on Upwork. They present themselves as one male freelancer since they are well aware that men make more money than women and can be more assertive without being described as ‘bossy’. Furthermore, they are Latin American, which means even less money. The professor told Papa that in order to get clients she has to “take on jobs that are pretty slave-like”. Another example is a Greek girl who, working as a social media fan (which means following and reacting to social media accounts), declares: “I am always looking on the Internet for new virtual jobs. I study management, but the situation right now in Greece, it’s awful. Economic crisis and unemployment.” Often these kinds of gigs require sensitivity, like that of the online dating coach (studying clinical psychology in the meantime) who had to “gently discourage a client from using the nickname ‘CunnilingusKing’ for a ChristianMingle profile”.

For the sake of completeness but also — I have to admit — to save time on a translation, I tried commissioning a gig on Fiverr. I chose the seller more or less at random, opting for an intermediate price among those available. In the end I hired an Italian-Australian girl for 35 euros to

<sup>5</sup> ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) is a tingling sensation involving the scalp and the neck which can be triggered by specific auditory or visual stimuli. ASMR as a genre is made of videos displaying these stimuli.



translate 1500 words. Let's do a few calculations: a text of this length requires at least three hours' work, so the rate, excluding the percentage that belongs to Fiverr, is just under ten euros per hour, a figure that corresponds to the minimum wage in Australia, excluding taxes. A couple of clicks and my order was sent; two days later I was to receive my translation. From the dedicated app I could check the freelancer's local time and that she was active on the site. I also noticed a countdown to the delivery date. Shortly after placing the order, I received an email from Fiverr: "Congratulations on your first gig. You are now officially a doer". At this point I felt a bit guilty — ironically, offloading what was to me a tedious task had made me a productive being.

From this brief and incomplete survey we learn that Fiverr is not only populated, as one might expect, by young workers. The company's own statistics confirm this: while at the beginning young people dominated the platform, gradually adults and even the over-fifties started to arrive.<sup>6</sup> Whatever their age, sellers seem to embrace the idea that "doing one thing and doing it well" is not a winning strategy on Fiverr. Thus many users occupy various roles, implementing a sort of continuous professional A/B testing to identify the services that reach the widest audience.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, microentrepreneurship also means limited investment and therefore reduced risk. On Fiverr there is therefore an unwritten rule that comes from the world of business and investments: diversify your portfolio.

<sup>6</sup> As journalist Leonardo Castañeda reports, data released by Wonolo, a staffing platform for blue-collar and labor contractors, reveals that Baby Boomers surpass Millennials in terms of earning, amount of gigs and ratings.

<sup>7</sup> In web design, A/B testing means comparing two or more versions of a single interface element to determine which is the most effective according to the response of a group of users.

## Creative Self-Destruction

Sometimes diversifying one's offer means inventing a service that didn't exist before. As we have said, Fiverr features large numbers of oddities that replicate the logic of memes and seem borrowed from the Theatre of the Absurd and performance art. These post-situationist services make us reflect on all the others. After all, what is the difference between those who record their voice for a commercial and those who film themselves while talking to a banana on the phone?<sup>8</sup> Both are *performances*, levelled and abstracted by Fiverr's handy interface. The site is therefore a clear manifestation of what Federico Chicchi and Anna Simone call "performance society", in which the performative qualities of contemporary work can provide economic enhancement. Fiverr encourages people to incessantly invent services, a process that, to echo Schumpeter, we could call *creative self-destruction* and define as the recurring recombination of bodily expressions, skills, practices and initiatives tailored to the individual.

On Fiverr work often becomes spectacle, and this can lead to unexpected consequences. In 2017 Felix Kjellberg, aka PewDiePie, the youtuber with the most subscribers in the world, ended up in trouble with a video explaining how the site worked. In the clip PewDiePie discovers Fiverr and explains what it is. Firstly he orders a logo, amazed at the simplicity and cost of the service, but then unfortunately decides to test the ethical limits of the platform and of those who work there by commissioning a blatantly antisemitic phrase. Fiverr's Funny Guys, a trio of young Indian men, bare chested and wearing festive decorations round their necks, hold up the message while dancing against a tropical

<sup>8</sup> This is the main service offered by Old Man Steve, an 80 year-old "Top Rated Seller" from Texas.

background. It's hard to ignore the post-colonial implications: here the Western gaze exerts its power by putting a value on the exoticism of bodies, movements and settings. Kjellberg was promptly banned from Youtube and the same happened to the poor Indians who later published a declaration of apology, explaining that they did not know what the offending words meant.<sup>9</sup>

Setting aside the scandals, let's consider one of Fiverr's success stories. Among the 'killer gigs' are those offered by Joel Young, father of a family forced to move around the US because of his job as an ecclesiastical pastor. Using only his laptop and a microphone Young earned almost a million dollars by creating voice-overs on Fiverr. Reflecting on his career in a CNBC interview, Young explains how the key to his "rise to fame" has been to stand on his own two feet and make things happen. In contrast to this, the marketplace has many detractors too. Some consider Fiverr a scam and have created a site that says just that: Fiverr is a Scam. A scam for both buyers, who for example buy followers that disappear within a few days from their social networks; but also for the sellers, because the platform "pits desperate sellers from across the world against each other in the hopes of securing the precious four bucks". Fiverr, like numerous online services, generalises access to resources and services, but in doing so it homogenises the market regardless of the cultural and economic differences of the realities involved. A US graphic designer can be found competing with a Bengali colleague for remuneration that is equivalent on paper only. Some time ago, a story relating to Trump's presidential campaign caused a stir. One of the slogans constantly repeated by

<sup>9</sup> The platform makes visible other forms of bias and racial disparity that have a broader social origin. A case in point is the account of a black woman from the US that uses an image of a mildly sexualised white woman to promote her gigs.

the current US president was the idea of bringing work back to America. “Stop with the outsourcing!” Trump exclaimed. Well, it turned out that among the designers of the slides used by the then candidate was a teenager from Singapore, hired on Fiverr. When interviewed, the designer explained how she was using the service to put some money aside for her dental braces.

In a context such as this, whose side is Fiverr on? In other words, does Fiverr consider it more important to facilitate the work of the people selling or to help buyers take advantage of low-cost, unlicensed labour by offloading the expenses on freelancers? In this regard, the company's position remains somewhat ambiguous. A few years ago it published a sponsored post that asked: “why pay \$100 for a logo?” triggering the indignation of many graphic designers. In the press release section, Fiverr boasts articles with rather depressing headlines, such as “How one man uses Fiverr and creativity in a poor man's economy”, which declares enthusiastically that for five dollars you can now delegate entire projects to strangers. Fiverr is also promoted as the perfect tool for *bootstrapping* a start-up, i.e., setting it up with minimal financial resources. A testimonial from Fiverr explains on the homepage that the site allowed her to “delegate stress”, while another rejoices in the time saved thanks to it. Fiverr also provides resources to enhance the independence of its microentrepreneurs by offering tutorials and tools to manage their finances. One such example is Elevate, a sort of 101 for freelancers. Moreover, the site protects freelancers by making payment immediate and eliminating the prospect of having to wait thirty, sixty or even ninety days. The real question therefore seems to be: what is the difference between buyer and seller, since, as we have seen, the title of doer can be boasted by both. On Fiverr everyone seems to be someone

else's freelancer, a perfect Ponzi scheme that benefits the platform above all else.

### **"Incubators Are for Chickens"**

Some time ago Jia Tolentino wrote an article for the New Yorker entitled "The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death". It was just one of the many reactions to an advertising campaign that made Fiverr jump into the headlines. A major source of indignation was a poster showing the close-up of a young doer with the somewhat sulky features of a Calvin Klein model. The portrait, by British photographer Platon, who immortalised Obama, Putin and Mark Zuckerberg, is accompanied by the stark characters of the following text:

You eat a coffee for lunch.  
You follow through on your follow through.  
Sleep deprivation is your drug of choice.  
You might be a doer.

The poster appeared in the New York subway, where it attracted the attention of sleepy commuters who promptly vented their rage on Twitter against what is only a small part of Fiverr's advertising campaign. The #InDoersWeTrust campaign uses a slogan that mixes religious and economic references with the identity of the country ("In God We Trust" is the motto of the United States of America and appears on their banknotes).<sup>10</sup> A second variation is an ad in which we follow the doers' routine and watch microentrepreneurs communicating with the other side of the world ("Ni Hao Ma") from a club toilet, or tirelessly promoting their business with their own relatives. Doers "get things done" and are

<sup>10</sup> The very concept of being a 'doer' has a religious undertone, as it resonates with the Puritan admonitions of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678): "It will not be said: did you believe? — but: were you Doers, or Talkers only?"

constantly available, even during sex. Those in question are mostly white women, although the cover of *Entrepreneur* magazine shows a young man. The frantic pace of the ad is reminiscent of angst-ridden films like *Birdman* and *Whiplash*, which both explore the dilemmas of personal success.

The always-on atmosphere of Fiverr, pervaded as it is by a subliminal anxiety and punctuated by the beating of an energy drink-fuelled pumping heart, looks like a managerial hijacking of *Trainspotting*'s generational manifesto. In this case, however, 'choosing life' means neglecting the needs of one's own body. It means ignoring death, which makes its appearance in a short cameo. Doers couldn't care less about ideas ("my little sister has ideas...") because they are certainly not dreamers. Doers despise the high-tech industry and its prophets. It's time to "beat the gurus, beat the trust fund kids, beat the tech bros". No one believes in 'unicorns' anymore: fairy tales are for kids.<sup>11</sup> The financial sector bureaucrats — bankers, VCs, etc. — are (literally) sharks to the new entrepreneur's eyes. Not to mention the geek gangs with their silly gadgets. Forget brainstorming, endless meetings and all those company rituals that only serve to waste time. The ad recalls the 2014 Cadillac commercial, an open celebration of the American work ethic seen from the angle of someone who has made it to the top. The fundamental difference being that now all traces of luxury have disappeared.

The campaign was created by DCX Growth Accelerator, a Brooklyn-based agency that has no qualms about calling "ideology" what an ordinary advertiser would call a concept. The ideology in question is defined by cultural

<sup>11</sup> In venture capital jargon, a unicorn is a start-up with a market value of over a billion dollars.

tension between the lean entrepreneur and the bureaucratic elite. For the campaign's creators, the lean entrepreneur is nothing more than a small freelancer who works hard while the bureaucratic elite is not, as one might think, composed of lustreless managers, but rather the TED talk people, of those who get by on bread and disruption. The entrepreneurship celebrated by Fiverr is therefore of the type that is invisible to the media, which is all too busy pouring rivers of ink on the latest of Elon Musk's whims. Cited on the website Attn:, Fiverr's Global Head of Digital, Chris Lane, does not hesitate to define the campaign as a celebration of the entrepreneurial spirit and explains its intentions: "We want people to get out of their comfort zones, challenge them to think about their lives and if they are doing everything they can to achieve success". If the purpose of the campaign was to turn Fiverr into a recognisable brand, slogans such as "Make America Do Again" (remember the girl from Singapore?) and "Nothing like a safe, reliable paycheck. To crush your soul", although causing media outrage, ensured this would happen. Fiverr means doing.

The campaign signals a change in the entrepreneurial ideal that echoes the political turmoil of the moment. Doers are not the typical entrepreneurs celebrated by the media for their sci-fi predictions. The new entrepreneur is neither a visionary nor a technology wizard. The new entrepreneur, the doer, is not, as in the American tradition, simply industrious, but *busy*. What Fiverr promotes is a kind of entrepreneurial populism, according to which the techno-financial elite of *do-nothings* will soon be demolished by the multitude of *doers*, the real ones. Could it be that the advertisers had a stroke of genius during their brainstorming, realising that there is no topic more viral than our perverse relationship with work? The campaign is a distorting mirror that magni-

fies the collective obsession with *busyness* and the guilt that goes with it. We get angry with Fiverr but in the end we are mad at ourselves and at our inability to find the right work/life balance. “If you’re not doing, then what are you doing?”, asks the doer inside of us all.<sup>12</sup>

Praise for doers, work ethic and competition are not the only values to define Fiverr’s narrative, just as advertising campaigns are not the only means. Another key concept is independence which, as we have seen, goes hand in hand with the celebration of self-employment. In this regard, Fiverr carried out a study which set out to demonstrate that micro-entrepreneurship leads to financial independence. The issue of independence also transforms the company’s managerial structure, given that Fiverr considers itself an organisation in which everyone is a CEO. There is no shortage of articles and infomercials in which Micha Kaufman personally speaks out in favour of the gig economy, which, as stated in *Wired*, is the “force that could save the American worker”. Another recurring theme is that of globalism. Freelance work does not need roots as it’s nomadic, fluid, spread out. It is no coincidence that the advertising campaign favoured the mobile infrastructures of informal work, such as turnstiles and underground stations. Fiverr launched a call to hire a Chief Digital Nomad, whose job would be to travel the world to document the life of freelancers. The successful candidate was the Nigerian Chelsy O, whose first trip was to Vietnam to celebrate International Labour Day. Finally, like any self-respecting tech company, Fiverr is not lacking in self-irony, and so makes fun of the universe of self-help (“You only need one habit to

<sup>12</sup> At the time of writing, Fiverr launched a new campaign in Berlin to promote its European expansion. Decidedly more sober than its American counterpart, the campaign emphasises the positive qualities of a temporary partnership between the buyer and the seller: convenience, trust, etc.



be effective”, in contradiction to what Stephen Covey claims<sup>13</sup>) and the entrepreneurial rhetoric and its fetishes, including an entrepreneurial gene, featured in what turned out to be an April Fools video.

## Do or Delegate

“When you need to delegate, you should,” writes Adam Dachis about Fiverr on LifeHacker. Delegate when possible, or when it is worth spending a modest sum rather than wasting your valuable time. Delegate tedious, stressful or thankless tasks. But when is it so easy, how far can one go? For example, a graphic design student who was not particularly interested in the programming course, confessed to me he had delegated the code writing part of the exam. “What matters is the idea to be developed, not its development,” he told me. Fiverr certainly didn’t give rise to the idea of passing the buck (people who write theses on behalf of third parties have been doing so since time began), yet the immediacy the network allows heightens the phenomenon, raising a series of questions. In affluent societies, will everyone just be an ‘art director’ who creates visions and ideas that are then put into practice somewhere else by someone else? If so, what will become of professional identity and skills... of one’s *trade* (a word that already sounds outdated). Roughly summarising the effects of the popularisation of digital technologies, we can identify three ‘revolutions’. The first concerns the advent of personal computers, which enabled access to tools. The second, that of the web, enabled access to distribution channels. Finally, the third, that of the gig economy (still in progress), ensures access to (cheap) labour. Fiverr, like many other online service brokers, incorporates all three of these revolutions in what could be called a

<sup>13</sup> Covey wrote the bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

partial *democratisation of delegation*. Even Fiverr jokes about it, posting a meme on Instagram showing a young man in pyjamas forced to outsource all his employees because he still lives with his parents.

The democratisation of delegation generates both paradoxical and deplorable phenomena. An example of the former is Wistand, an online service that allows you to pay “physical people” to represent you at public manifestations like protests; this is basically the new frontier of clicktivism, where the very flesh of ‘the social body’ is the product of outsourcing. Wistand reminds me of *A Crowded Apocalypse*, a project by Italian media art collective locose. In 2012, the group commissioned a panoply of conspiracy theories through crowdsourcing websites. The workers would cover their faces and show a sign with a common symbol and a conspiratorial one-liner. On the deplorable side, we discover that in France Uber Eats or Deliveroo gigs are sublet by the French legal owner of the accounts to undocumented migrants and minors, who keep only half of what they gain. Here’s how the sharing of the sharing economy works.

If everyone delegates, who does the doing? In an episode of the Silicon Valley series (a masterpiece by Mike Judge, author of *Beavis and Butt-Head*) some of the characters go to a supermarket where no one does their own shopping anymore, and the only ones left are the employees of various start-ups who do the shopping and home delivery for others. This scene lets us think of the gendered lineage of delegation, now partially displaced, as grocery shopping is a traditionally womanly task. In this respect, Melissa Gregg understands both contemporary productivity and delegation as the veiling of “the ongoing trauma arising from the death of the secretary”, and that of the housewife, we might add.

Silicon Valley's comic piece might not make us laugh. It is not out of laziness that the delegation society offloads its burdens elsewhere, but rather because it is too busy. A recent Amazon service seems to confirm this. Amazon Key electronically controls the door lock so that different tradespeople can gain access when the owner is absent. The introductory ad shows a young woman getting a parcel delivered and the house cleaned just in time for a visit from her parents, while she is stuck in the office. From there she can use a camera — or rather microsurveillance software — to check that the staff do a good job. According to philosopher André Gorz, who at the end of the 1980s argued against the limits of economic reason, the consequences of delegating include a sense of disorientation, the erosion of a feeling of belonging to the environment we live in, a sense that is heightened further when care and active participation are missing. The house ceases to belong to those who live in it in the same way that a car driven by a chauffeur belongs more to the chauffeur than the rightful owner; yet the vehicle does not actually belong to the chauffeur. And who knows, maybe they even need an Uber to get home.

Now that we have analysed the point of view of those who undertake, let us move on to the one of those who are *undertaken*. Are the sellers really as independent as Fiverr would have us believe? To understand this, one would need to know the average hourly earnings, the geographical distribution of capital flows, the degree of continuity of the gigs and so on. For obvious reasons, this information is not accessible and therefore it can only be guessed at. In 2012 Fiverr pointed out that for 14% of sellers the site was the primary source of income. However, the amount of this income is not clear. A search on the internet mostly turns up examples of survivorship bias ("Woman earns more than \$9000 a

month on Fiverr”) which certainly don’t help give us a clear idea. However, judging by the way Fiverr is considered by the press, a few doubts arise. The Wall Street Journal introduces the online marketplace by asking: “What do you get when you mix unemployment, frugal consumers and internet boredom?” Then there are those who talk about unemployed bankers who work until dawn on the site. And, if we consider the fact that certain creative professions are carried out in any case almost for free, the platform may even seem, to some, a sign of progressive professionalisation.

Fiverr, the social experiment turned global marketplace, is a user-friendly tool that multiplies the levels of entrepreneurial organisation of work. It organises the field of action and the microentrepreneurs subsequently organise one another. In order to do this, the work is fragmented into a large number of *microtasks*. Taken to its extreme consequences, this fragmentation takes the form of a sorites paradox: into how many microtasks can a piece of work be broken up before it is no longer considered such? If this sounds like science fiction, just think of the *meatware* described by Pietro Minto in an article for online magazine Il Tascabile, i.e. a type of labour that mixes the cognitive faculties of human beings with the repetitiveness typical of computers. On sites like Mechanical Turk (owned by Amazon) you can earn a few dollars by finding kittens in the photos or copying addresses printed on business cards. CAPTCHAs, little tests carried out online to prove that you are not a bot, work in a similar way. Some time ago, a US woman sued Google for her work done on CAPTCHAs. She lost the lawsuit, based on the fact that the solution of a CAPTCHA was too fast to be considered real work. Yet millions of solutions are crystallised in the online services we use; they are what make them intelligent and therefore profitable.

Although most self-employment is still carried out without using digital markets, it is possible to envisage a near future in which Fiverr or a similar site becomes as pervasive as Facebook, thus representing a compulsory stage for the growing number of global freelancers. In this case, the creative self-destruction of careers and the rapid prototyping of professional roles would become even more normal than it already is. Fiverr is clearly pushing in this direction, encouraging its users to put into practice what the German artist Sebastian Schmieg calls *survival creativity*, i.e. “doing whatever it takes to survive in a competitive environment”.<sup>14</sup>

Whether survival creativity is a necessity of the times we live in or rather an extravagant form of emancipation is open to debate. For certain, we don't need to project ourselves into the future to discover that many people resort to the most absurd — and sometimes humiliating — actions to make ends meet on the internet. Kaufman sees nothing new in this. In perfect Schumpeterian style, the macroentrepreneur considers the economic crisis to be an excellent opportunity to innovate. Referring to the Great Depression of the 1930s, he argued in his column in *Forbes* magazine that “desperate times force innovative thinking”. Fiverr is the ideal place to exercise this mentality because, as Lamar Morgan wrote on the *Examiner* blog in 2012, “in a crazy economy, Fiverr is a good choice for both sellers and buyers”.

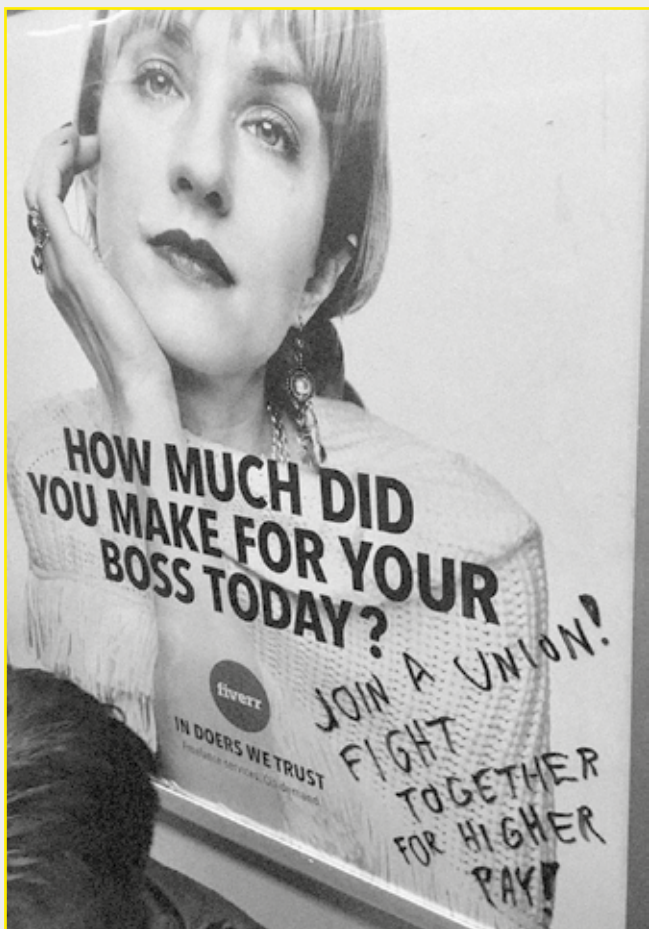
<sup>14</sup> Schmieg is the author of *I Will Say Whatever You Want in Front of a Pizza*, a speculative Prezi slide deck that, seen from the perspective of a cloud worker, explores digital labour and the amalgamation of software and humans. Schmieg has also discussed the disappearance of labour by means of fragmentation in his 2018 essay *Humans As Software Extensions*.



Fiverr user Old Man Steve's promotional video. One of his services consists of delivering greetings using a banana instead of a telephone.



Part of Fiverr's "In Doers We Trust" advertising campaign. Image by British photographer Platon.



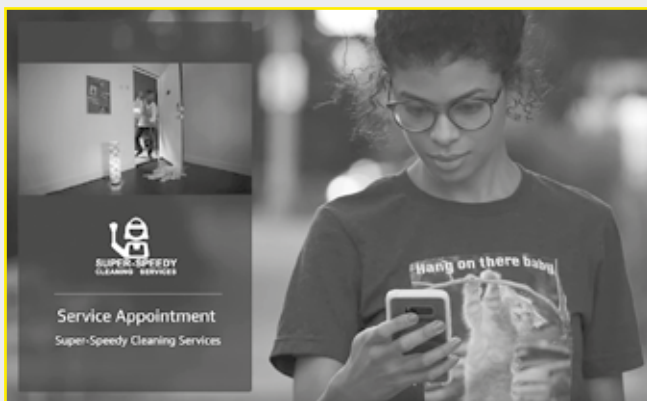
A Fiverr poster with the words, “Join a Union! Fight for higher pay!”, scrawled on it by labour activists.



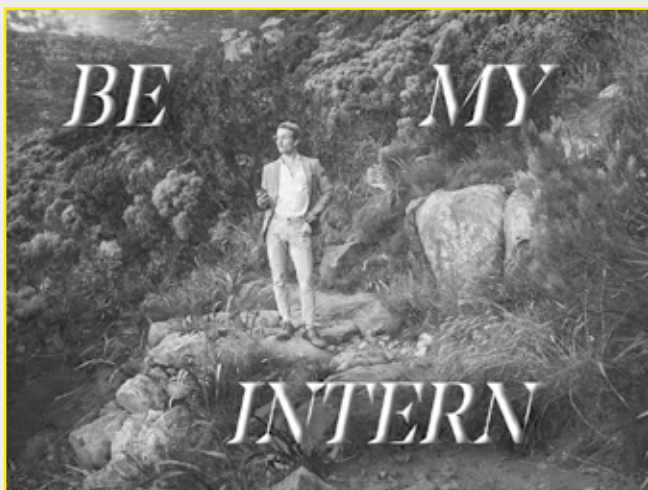
Outsourcing all your employees  
because mom's house doesn't have  
room



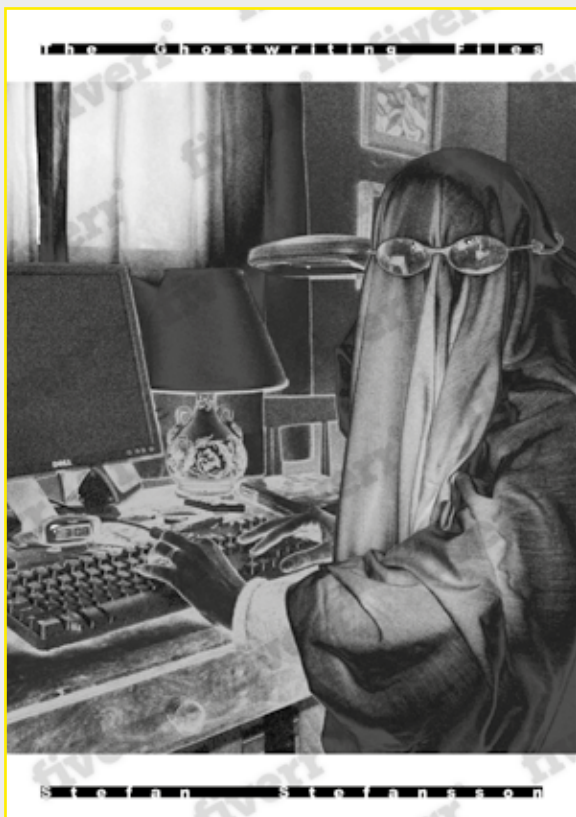
Meme posted on Fiverr's Instagram account.



Promotional video of Amazon Key, a service to remotely control the door of one's house to allow for various workforces to deliver packages, do the cleaning, etc. while being controlled via a webcam.



Instagram post by German artist Andy Kassier, 2017. The ability to delegate work is considered to be a sign of living the “good life”. Kassier’s call for interns is a romantic celebration of free time (he can call his staff at any time while enjoying nature) and an indication of success as having other people to manage.



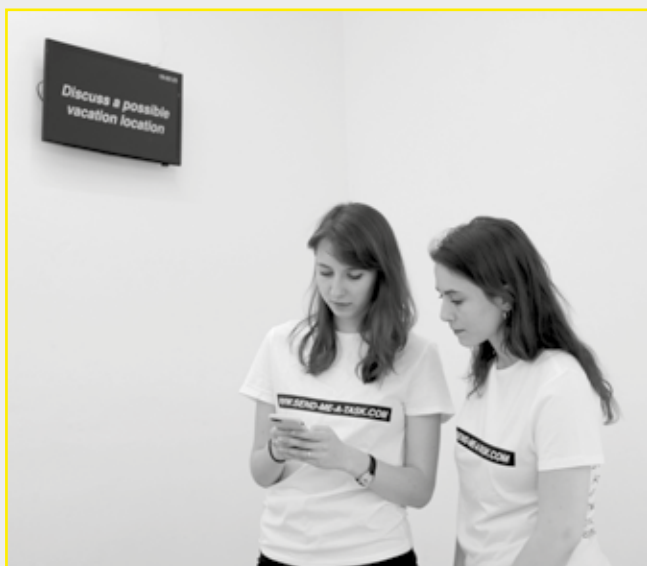
*The Ghostwriting Files* by Stefán Stefánsson, 2018. Stefánsson fully outsourced his Bachelor thesis: not only the writing of it, but also its design. He kept track of all the conversations he had with freelancers on gig platforms. These conversations suggest that not only the actual work is delegated but also the stress and pressure of deadlines, while an emotional bond, authentic or otherwise, is being forged.



*Get Staffed*, a short comedy film written by Jack Barry and directed by Big Red Button in 2017. A man sacrifices income and possessions to outsource every single task of his, including being interviewed for the film itself. The final outcome of the democratisation of delegation.



*Technologies of Care* by artist Elisa Giardina Papa, 2016. The work includes a series of interviews with digital labourers (hired by the artist) that work as caregivers in different capacities.



WWW.SEND-ME-A-TASK.COM by Dasha Ilina and Amanda Lewis, 2017. In this performance that took place at Plateforme gallery in Paris, the artists take on the role of the tasker: they execute tasks commissioned by anonymous users through a dedicated website.

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## How it works

Hire a boss who will ensure you're consistently being productive.

- 1**

Send us your todos.

Send us your todos for the day, or todos with a specific deadline. Make sure they're quantifiable, because you'll have to prove you did them.
- 2**

Send proof you completed them.

Send us a screenshot, or some other proof that you finished them.
- 3**

If you don't, we will take you to task.

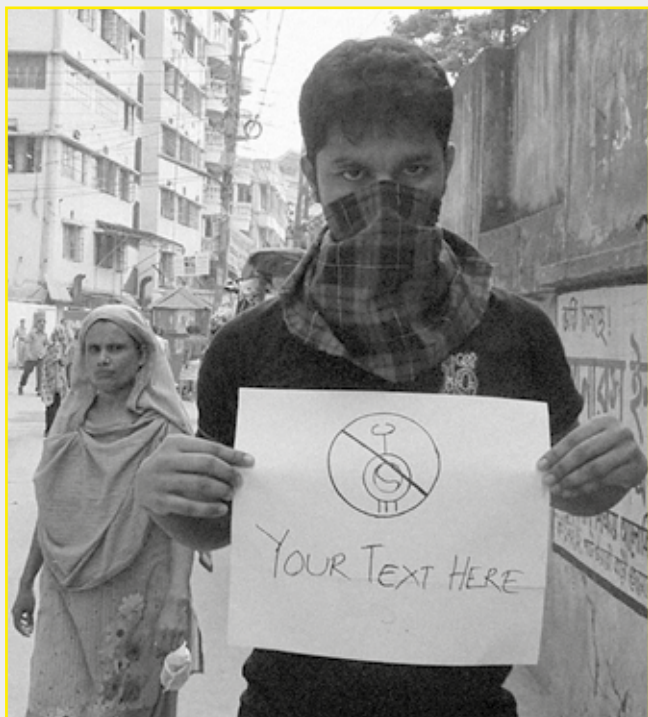
If you default, we will follow up with you, and not stop bugging you till it's resolved.
- 4**

You smash through your goals.

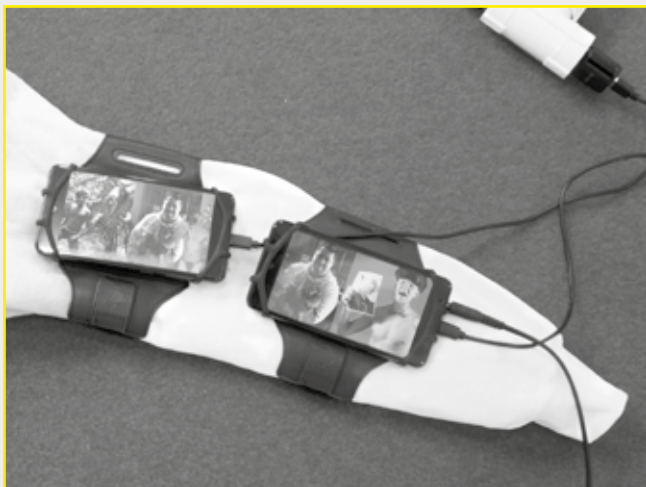
You become ridiculously productive and possibly win the Nobel Prize.

Boss As a Service website. An idea that combines self-management, ersatz authority and delegation. In absence of the good boss of yore, this website takes care of bugging the user to meet their deadlines and thus increase their productivity.





*A Crowded Apocalypse*, a 2012 project by Italian media art collective Iocose.



*Hopes and Deliveries (Survival Creativity)* by Sebastian Schmieg, 2017-18. An archive of videos made by Fiverr gig workers for their clients. In the artist's words, through the archive, "mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation become visible as a performance of survival creativity: coming up with whatever idea it takes to survive in a competitive field."

What is crowdfunding for? “For collectively funding innovative products and services, albums, documentaries, books, video games, comics, etc.” — you might say. In other words, if you are part of that minority that knows the term (according to the Pew Research Center 61% of Americans have never heard of it), you will probably be inclined to associate crowdfunding with the activity of technology start-ups and so-called creative industries. This assumption is partly confirmed by the data available on the highest funded crowdfunding projects. Besides the great number of cryptocurrency-related campaigns run independently or through Ethereum in the top ten, most of the projects were hosted by either Kickstarter or Indiegogo, both platforms generally used to finance creative or innovative undertakings. Of course, the sheer amount of money raised lures a comparable magnitude of media attention, thus establishing a feedback loop between the aggregation of a large public through big news outlets and financial success. This is the case of Pebble, a smartwatch idea which collected more than 40 million dollars during three separate Kickstarter campaigns.<sup>15</sup>

Another reason why crowdfunding is generally associated with creativity and innovation is because of its origins. The practice of collecting monetary contributions from internet users emerged primarily as a means of financing artistic ventures. One of these was the US tour of the British rock band Marillion, made possible in 1997 by the \$60,000 donated by their fans online. This early instance, in which online fundraising wasn't yet a

<sup>15</sup> This massive crowdfunding achievement didn't prevent the company from shutting down after four years of activity.

streamlined process, reminds us that crowdfunding itself is an entrepreneurial idea first implemented in the context of the arts. Thanks to crowdfunding, what was an informal exchange with an audience was turned into a business model. Now, two decades later, nurturing a community is considered one of the fundamental features of crowdfunding.

The managerial impetus of these musicians adds a new layer of meaning to the notion of creative destruction formulated by Joseph Schumpeter, where a new commodity, technology, type of organisation, etc. erodes pre-existing economic structures and creates new ones. Since the relationship with fans is part of an artist's practice, using it to gather donations is a financial invention where the artistic, creative component is fundamental. Crowdfunding originates as an idea that *creatively* deteriorates the role and position of middle men and evolves as an expression of creative entrepreneurialism, where there is no clear boundary between the 'creative' and the 'entrepreneurial'. More specifically, the former becomes a function of the latter and vice-versa. As the band recounts:

We then sacked the manager. We emailed the 6000 fans on our database to ask, "Would you buy the album in advance?" most replied "yes." [...] That was the crowdfunding model that has been so successfully imitated by many others including the most successful, Kickstarter.

Surprisingly, despite the artistic legacy of crowdfunding and the recurrent media coverage of innovation, the primary destination of online contributions is neither edgy technology nor artistic work, but personal fundraising. While 68% of US donors have contributed to campaigns

launched to help a person in need, only 34% funded a new product and even less (30%) decided to support musicians and other types of artists. Furthermore, GoFundMe, a platform focused on social and personal campaigns, surpassed the bar of 3 billion dollars raised in 2016 while Kickstarter reached that goal only one year later. GoFundMe is not the only platform mainly devoted to personal crowdfunding. There is also YouCaring, GiveForward, and even Indiegogo has its own parallel charity crowdfunding platform called Generosity. Does their core business make them different from, say, Kickstarter? Do they incarnate a fundraising logic different from the one of crowdfunding sites focused on art and invention? In other words, is there a fundamental difference between asking money for a medical emergency and an IoT gadget? To answer these questions, let's dwell on a series of campaigns that reveal the way in which personal crowdfunding encourages, and to some extent requires, creative entrepreneurialism. The choice of these campaigns is motivated by the fact the 'entrepreneurs of the self' who initiated them, while undergoing the structural dynamics of crowdfunding, tried to expand its scope in different ways.

### **The Unpaid Intern as Media Company**

Nowadays, internships represent one of the few viable paths to initiate a career in the most diverse professional sectors. The internship, originally meant to be a learning experience, is therefore reframed as an opportunity to eventually land a job. Because of high demand, companies and institutions — even well-established ones — can easily offer internships that pay little money or none at all. In other words, the internship is understood as a required investment to enter the labour market. It isn't hard to appreciate the way in which these unpaid internships contribute to exacerbate class advantage,

since only the individuals who have enough *financial stamina* are able to afford this point of access to professional life.<sup>16</sup>

What about all the others? They need to come up with *creative* solutions. Crowdfunding is one of those. At the time of writing, a search for “unpaid internship” on GoFundMe generates almost five hundred results, while the campaigns generally related to internships are more than ten thousand. These campaigns feature young graduates smiling at the camera, passionately describing their interests and academic achievements while detailing their specific financial needs. The descriptions, which fluctuate between very elaborate pitches and extremely concise blurbs, are characterised by a mongrel literary genre in which the diary, the résumé and the business plan converge. This new literature already has its own manuals, like a GoFundMe guide for a successful education-related campaign.

Speaking of stage and crowdfunding, the story of Clement Nocos is both exemplary and exceptional. In 2016, Nocos, a Master of Public Policy graduate and activist from Canada, got accepted for a prestigious internship at the United Nations, a “one-time-only opportunity”, as he somehow ironically defines it. There was only one drawback: the internship was unpaid, a decisive problem given the steep cost of living in a city like New York. For his campaign, Nocos chose Generosity, Indiegogo’s side-platform “for human goodness”, because of the absence of an expiry date, the possibility of adding ‘perks’ and the regular disbursement of funds. In order to gather attention, he produced a four-minute-long video clip

<sup>16</sup> See: *Training for Exploitation?* by the Precarious Workers Brigade (2017) and *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy* by Ross Perlin (2014).

explaining why people should donate to his campaign. To make the video effective, Nocos, a political scientist, crafted his message with the aim of entertaining his audience with some photoshopped images of himself and a few ironic intermezzos accompanied by an old school hip-hop soundtrack. Furthermore, the aspiring intern took advantage of some promotional strategies, such as asking for only half of the money he needed or offering a United Nations mug (“not for sale!”) to particularly generous donors. The campaign’s description resembles the FAQ section of a website, including such questions as “Why should I help you?” and “What do you need?”. At the bottom of the page, Nocos offers a breakdown of his expenses (250\$ per month are for food). His efforts included a “crafty social media campaign”, deemed almost indispensable by the platform which constantly insists on sharing public updates.

In a post on Medium, Nocos explains the reasons and the results of his campaign in detail: “it seems like getting on the internship grind was the only way to get that work experience that has apparently become necessary for securing at least precarious, entry-level employment.” With student debt on his shoulders, crowdfunding seemed the only possible solution to finance the internship (“Why Crowdfunding? What else do I got?”). But perhaps even this would not have been enough since Nocos was certainly not the only one to use this tool. This is why he felt the need to differentiate himself. So, he started a blog and a podcast about the grinds of interning at the United Nations (12 episodes in total). Out of the \$6,000 he aimed to raise, he was able to gather less than \$2,000 over a year. Reflecting back on his experience, Nocos, who was skeptical of crowdfunding in the first place, could only confirm his original feelings. He speaks of social media fatigue, he mentions

the uneasiness of having to ask for money to a circle of friends who are often going through a tough situation, and he concludes that “the crowdfunding market has literally crowded itself out when it comes to people asking for money to replace labour income for their unpaid internships”.

Despite the meager loot he gained, Nocos’s efforts produced an additional result. It didn’t take long before self-promotion turned into a critique addressing the very issue of unpaid internships. In his podcast “The Internship Grind”, he discussed the Fair Internship Initiative, the book *Intern Nation*, and he interviewed Nathalie Berger and David Leo Hyde, who made *An Unpaid Act*, a documentary on unpaid internships and precarity. Nonetheless, looking back at this activity, Nocos humbly acknowledges the ambivalence of ‘selfishly’ lobbying for a personal cause and addressing a structural condition:

But to be frank, the podcast isn’t all just about documenting this kind of crappy quirk of the modern labour market. It was intentionally self-serving, in a way, to draw attention to my own crowdfunding campaign and make it more visible for potential donors.

According to Angela McRobbie, “[t]he cheerful, upbeat, passionate, entrepreneurial person who is constantly vigilant in regard to opportunities for projects or contracts must display a persona that mobilizes the need to be at all times one’s own press and publicity agent”. What role did Nocos play in his own campaign? As he was aware that crowdfunding success is strictly related to the user’s ability to operate as a media company, he acted simultaneously as a copywriter, a video-maker, a social media manager and an accountant.



## **Call to Action Meets Activism**

On personal crowdfunding platforms, it is not uncommon to read about a broken arm, a heart transplant or a rare disease. In these cases the campaign goals range from a few thousand dollars to more than half a million. \$60,000 was the amount asked by Kati McFarland, a 25 year-old photographer from Arkansas suffering from Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, a genetic disorder causing many different complications like fainting, fatigue and stomach paralysis. She sums up her condition by saying that she “can barely walk /stand / eat w/o severe pain/ dislocations / vomiting / blackout”. After her father suddenly passed away, McFarland found herself alone struggling to manage her medical expenses that exceed, by far, the benefits provided by the State. This is why she started a fundraiser on YouCaring, a platform that unlike GoFundMe doesn’t take any fee on the donations (apart from a 2.9% deduction from Paypal, WePay or Stripe).

McFarland’s campaign doesn’t look as carefully crafted as Nocos’s one. She doesn’t have a video on her page, only a few images showing her while being under medical treatments and some screenshots of the related costs. The first part of the description follows the usual script of personal storytelling while the second part is an extremely detailed cost breakdown filled with medical technicalities. Given the short attention spans internet users have grown accustomed to, it isn’t hard to understand why it took her more than 7,000 re-blogs and shares to reach a preliminary goal of 1,200 dollars.

Things changed for McFarland after she attended a talk by congressman Tom Cotton, an ardent opponent of Obamacare, the healthcare act that the new Trump administration has been trying to repeal. During the event, she took the floor and explained to the congress-

man that without the coverage provided by the Affordable Care Act she would lose her life (“I will die. That is not hyperbole”). McFarland then asked him whether he would commit not only to the repeal of the act, but also to building a proper substitute. This is when the audience exploded in a big round of applause. After Cotton tried to skirt the issue, the crowd vocally expressed its disapproval by repeatedly shouting “do your job”. After being published on the internet, Kati McFarland’s intervention gained some degree of virality. Then, she started to see her fundraiser grow at a surprising rate. In the meantime, McFarland had been invited to talk about what happened on several TV news programmes, where she asserted the need to give a face to the collective demand for accessible healthcare. However, this effort wasn’t disconnected from the promotion of the campaign, a matter of life and death for her:

There are many things I wish I could have said [...] but unfortunately I just had to focus on shoehorning in the link to this fundraiser (probably to Don Lemon’s chagrin), but you gotta do what you gotta do when medical bills are involved.”

Of course, the media attention that McFarland got thanks to her intervention had a positive effect on the donations to her campaign. But at the same time, her story became symbolic of all the patients endangered by ill-advised policy making. In a similar way to Nocos, Kati McFarland had to deal with the highly ambiguous space where personal promotion goes hand in hand with the attempt to shed light on a structural deficit.

### **First as Arts, Then as Tragedy**

Around 2007 a meme started to circulate on the internet. It was the picture of a kid on a beach holding a

fist full of sand, with an expression of pride on his face. The picture became known as Success Kid and it is still used nowadays to either express frustration or describe situations in which one is 'winning'. In 2015, Sam Griner, the boy impersonating the Success Kid meme, now 8 years old, availed himself of his online popularity to fund the transplant of his father's kidney. A campaign was launched on GoFundMe including only one family picture with Sam in the middle and a concise account of the calamity. The campaign raised more than \$100.000, thanks to which the transplant was eventually possible. Significantly, on The Verge, the news was published under the category of entertainment.

Despite its happy ending, its vicissitudes can be read as a cautionary tale about the role played by social and news media attention when it comes to personal crowdfunding. Here, a series of more or less arbitrary criteria increase the chances of a campaign's success, although without guaranteeing it. After all, there is still no such thing as a science of virality. Such vagueness is confirmed by the overly generic tips offered by GoFundMe itself: "avoid blurry pictures [...] Write a catchy and descriptive title. Which title sounds better? 'I Need Money!' or 'Julie's Rally Against Cancer'.... the second one, right?". A title needs to be "catchy" in order to stand out from the plethora of running campaigns. In this scenario, the access to an informal means of protection against emergencies turns into a race where online media literacy is a precious competitive advantage.

As writer Alana Massey points out, crowdfunding for medical care represents the most radical transformation of fundraising since the '80s. At that time, another crucial shift was taking place with charities converting their model into an individual-based sponsorship. In-

stead of being asked to “sponsor children in need”, donors would be now invited to “sponsor a child in need”. The singularisation of solidarity which is also embedded in crowdfunding sites is often understood as a positive feature, because it offers “the opportunity to help one specific person and help change one person’s life.” Furthermore, the individual-based relationship between the donor and the beneficiary is reinforced by the direct contact between them offered by crowdfunding platforms.

Considering the telegraphic style of several campaigns, one could assume that many of them are only meant to address family members and friends who are already aware of the issue at stake. In this case, crowdfunding offers a convenient interface that facilitates the coordination of fundraising. But frequently the hope is to reach a crowd of strangers and therefore compete for their attention. A crowd whose choices are likely reflective of several biases. Among them, there is one that sounds particularly gloomy when associated with personal crowdfunding: survivorship bias, the habit of focusing on successful past experiences while ignoring the others when it comes to drawing conclusions and lessons from them.<sup>17</sup> As writer Anne Helen Petersen puts it, “crowdfunding is fantastic at addressing need — but only certain types, and for certain people.”

Crowdfunding success is bolstered by online media dexterity. Journalist Luke O’Neil emphasises this aspect: “I often joke lately that I used to think I’ve wasted my life on Twitter, but it might actually come in handy

<sup>17</sup> In 2014, I created Kickended.com, an archive of Kickstarter’s \$0-pledged campaigns, to be able to navigate and bring attention to campaigns unable to raise any money, thus opposing the survivorship bias embedded in both news media and the interfaces of crowdfunding platforms.

when I inevitably need to crowdfund an operation. You have to hustle. You have to market. You have to build your brand.” O’Neil also draws a direct parallel between medical crowdfunding and the ecosystem of tech entrepreneurship. He sarcastically associates the presentation of GoFundMe users’ medical history to the stereotypical narrative of start-ups, implicitly revealing a similarity between an appeal to charitable spirits and a pitch to a venture capital firm: “Think of your cancer as the origin story a tech start-up tells about itself on the About section of its website”.

Emerging from O’Neil’s remarks is the brutal neutrality of crowdfunding towards the content it disseminates: no matter whether it’s employed to finance the “Coolest Cooler” or used as a means to alleviate the hardships looming throughout the whole spectrum of a lifetime.<sup>18</sup> The way in which Indiegogo introduces Generosity reveals the way in which crowdfunding is generalised by a mere extension of its target group:

We started Indiegogo in 2008 with a simple idea: Give people the power and resources to bring their ideas to life. Over the years we’ve watched in delight as inventors, musicians, storytellers, and activists pushed the boundaries of our original vision. [...] Inspired by the seemingly boundless compassion and creative spirit of our users, we challenged ourselves to do more — this time for the very people and causes that often need help the most. The ones that fall through the cracks. The ones that need a second chance. The ones on the brink. Generosity helps cancer patients with bills and students with tuition. Generosity boosts

<sup>18</sup> The Coolest Cooler is a multi-function fridge whose campaign has raised more than \$13 million, making it the most funded 2014 project on Kickstarter.

humanitarian efforts into new countries and helps nonprofits move quickly with their causes. Generosity fills the gap at the end of a tough month and supports the village after the storm.

In other words, crowdfunding repeats itself, first as arts, then as tragedy. But while doing so, it preserves the promotional language and entrepreneurial dynamics that characterise fundraising for art or innovation: things like ‘perks’, enforced social media bombardment, strategies borrowed from advertising, and, as Ian Bogost maintains, a semblance of the reality show. All of these aspects are critically addressed by artist and activist Josh MacPheel:

Our goal — our *imperative* — is to harden ourselves and our projects into cohesive, likable, and salable commodities. We wake up as brands, joyously exulting in these flattened, logo-like versions of ourselves. Clean and efficient with soft, smooth corners and antiseptic Helvetica expressions. What is not to love about these new forms, so sleek and attractive on the outside, with the promise of aiding us in the fulfillment of the last remaining human right in our society: the right to be an entrepreneur?

### **Sadtrepreneurs**

In 2014 American novelist Bruce Sterling gave a talk entitled “Whatever Happens to Musicians, Happens to Everybody”. He portrayed musicians as “patient zero in the critical injury clinic of the creative sweatshop”. Sterling referred to them as an avant-garde of the precarity experienced by creative workers. He also reflected on crowdfunding as a means to sustain their practice, concluding that it wouldn’t be a good idea since “the crowd lacks imagination”. According to Brett Neilson and Ned

Rossiter, the creative worker is considered by many as the precarious subject *par excellence*. Now that creative solutions are becoming a crucial means of addressing various forms of precariousness, we might read Sterling's portrait of musicians as canaries in the coal mine as an alarmingly vivid prediction. The people running campaigns on sites like GoFundMe can be seen as creative workers who decorate their own adversities, carrying out a practice sustained by an entrepreneurial attitude that includes management and promotion.

Judging by the personal crowdfunding campaigns, it would seem that the more precarious the situation, the less voluntary the entrepreneurial path is. We have already met online the kidtrepreneur, the solopreneur and even the bottrepreneur. We can now coin yet another term to describe the users who populate the personal crowdfunding sites. Many of those could be defined as *sadtrepeneurs*, subjects that unwillingly, or at least ambivalently, behave as entrepreneurs. To them, the creativity needed to run a successful campaign is not a liberating force, but a strategic necessity linked to subsistence or even survival.

Far from being uniquely the result of one's own passion, creative entrepreneurialism is increasingly becoming an obligation. In fact, as Ulrich Bröckling explains, "faith in the creative potential of the individual is the secular religion of the entrepreneurial self". More and more people reluctantly join the ranks of a novel kind of creative underclass whose very medium is constituted by its members' personal necessities. Is there a possibility to combine this entrepreneurial obligation with genuine expressions of discomfort? Is it possible to do PR through precarity and against precarisation? In this grim scenario, the stories of Clement Nocos and

Kati McFarland reflect the urge to divert attention solely from individual miseries to the broader structural conditions causing them.



## COOLEST COOLER: 21st Century Cooler that's Actually Cooler



The COOLEST is a portable party disguised as a cooler, bringing blended drinks, music and fun to any outdoor occasion.

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Created by  
Ryan Grepper

GEAR has been awarded \$1,000,000 to help bring this project to life.

Crowdfunding campaign for the Coolest Cooler multifunction cooler. After collecting over \$13,000,000, it became the most highly financed campaign of 2014 on Kickstarter.



Success Kid meme used to promote a crowdfunding campaign to finance a kidney transplant.



An example of rhetoric of survival creativity in an article by Richard Tyler for the Daily Telegraph written in 2006.

## EXIT STRATEGY

We have seen how the entrepreneurial mindset and its encouragement to see risk-taking in a positive light paradoxically presses *all* individuals to rise above *all* others, and how this discourse delegitimises anxieties and preempts any incentive to cooperation within precarity. Let us now try to answer one question. A question that began to take shape when we established that precarity and entrepreneurialism transversally cross the social body while not being intrinsically linked to affluence or paucity, to a single class or to a series of specific circumstances. Quite the opposite, they act like prisms, distorting one's perception of reality and personal identity.<sup>19</sup> The question we need to ask has become more tangible after investigating the effects of the entreprecariat on imposed or adopted rhythms, on inhabited or crossed spaces, on accepted or cleansed thoughts and feelings. It is a question, now urgent, that has accompanied us on our discouraging journey through digital services that foster competitiveness, coordinate pyramid schemes of delegated micro-work and create value out of the misfortunes of their users. The question that arose during this journey is, to put it simply, this: *how do we get out of it?*

*Unternehmergeist*, the entrepreneurial spirit, is a spectre that shakes the individual from inside and outside, demanding a circular optimisation of their efforts and a general strategic behaviour that is in fact a bet, given that the understanding of events is intrinsically partial. Similarly, precarity is like the scariest of the ghosts in

<sup>19</sup> Recently, media theorist Douglas Rushkoff described his encounter with a small group of ultra-rich brokers intent on preparing for the Event, an unspecified apocalypse. A global catastrophe is perhaps the closest thing to precarity for the powerful of the Earth.

Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Just as the Spirit of Christmas Yet-To-Come shows the avaricious Scrooge the sad destiny that awaits him if he does not change his ways, the image of failure is imprinted in the mind of the precarious subject, and it conditions their activity. In both cases this is how it is: *you must change your life*, incessantly and temporarily.<sup>20</sup> A virtuality guides current events, whether it is the positive image of an unlikely success permanently achieved or the tragic one of a definitive fall into misery. The entrepreneurial spirit feeds off the fear of not being able to get what one wants, while the precarious spirit embodies the fear of not being able to avoid what one fears. And if it is a matter of spirits, of entities which don't exist yet still do, how can they be exorcised?

First of all, a warning: any way out that only involves the individual is bound to fail. Any individual solution results in self-help and therefore in mere competitive advantage. For example, trying to escape personally from the imperative of busyness can be the equivalent of being more productive. Not surprisingly, relaxation and rest are an effective technique for productivity as the more relaxed you are, the better you work. But those who proudly purport to idleness and laziness should reflect on the circumstances that allow them such conditions. "Do as I do," says the idler, ignoring a cultural stigma that not everyone, for reasons ranging from prestige to income, can bear.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, any suggestion on how to exor-

20 ——— *You Must Change Your Life* is the title of Peter Sloterdijk's gargantuan work of 'philosophical self-help'. What is valuable in the German philosopher's perspective is his ability to shed a positive light on self-discipline by retracing its millenary history. One of the emblematic figures of training and improvement is that of the acrobat, a category solidary both to the entrepreneur and the precarious being. Can we conceive betterment and self-optimisation as an independent, non-oppressive exercise? How could such exercise escape entrepreneurial capture?

21 ——— This is not to say that a reduction of the working hours is inappropriate.

cise the *spirits of the entreprecariat* must be collective and cooperative, otherwise it is just another attempt at self-government, first exogenous and then internalised. Such self-government can go in different, if not opposite, directions. We discussed how entrepreneurialism demands overwork, and yet Tim Ferriss advocates for *The 4-Hour Workweek*. We looked at digital nomadism and at the impermanence of entrepreneurial spaces, and yet many microentrepreneurs work from home. We highlighted the lubricious qualities of niceness and outgoingness; and yet Beth Buelow points out that several of the contemporary entrepreneurial titans are introverts. In this sense, entrepreneurialism is not so much an ideology as a transfiguring agent, an apparatus able to convert any feature, proclivity and skill into economic investment.

Whether we position ourselves within the entrepreneurial discourse or the precarious one, the key word is *change*. Entrepreneurialism prescribes a bold attitude, and any hesitation is seen as cowardice. How can we change the collective vision of change? Perhaps it is here that the solution to the entreprecarious impasse lies. Perhaps we need to open up to anxiety, fear and more generally to negativity in order to orient ourselves in change without generating repression. As Byung-Chul Han reminds us, negativity, besides being a means of defence against the violence of forced optimism, is what makes existence what it is. Similarly, Barbara Ehrenreich speaks of “defensive pessimism”: such a stance — after all, no more than a healthy dose of realism — can contrast the heroic portrayal of a permanent beta existence that knows no fatigue or despondency.

A category that combines precarity and entrepreneuri-

On the contrary, a campaign like the one for the 4 day week (<https://www.4day-week.co.uk/>) is reasonable and urgent.

alism is that of flexibility, which is frequently mentioned in this book. In this regard, it is useful to debunk the false dichotomy that sees flexibility as the opposite of stability. It would be more correct to consider rigidity as the contrary to flexibility. In actual fact, real flexibility is in itself a *product* of stability: bushes bend in the wind precisely because their roots are sunk firmly in the earth. It is therefore a certain margin of stability — in the form of, for example, a basic income or a novel type of social security — that allows us to risk, to change, to try out new directions, with the enthusiasm charged by the entrepreneurial spirit.

Places unite space and time. In the entrecariat, time dominates space. It is a fragmented time that prevents us from developing a sense of belonging, since everything appears neutral, temporary and changeable. Measured time produces spaces that are merely logistic. The by-product of spaces dominated by time is anxiety. The individual that apparently travels or lives in a space is in reality adapting their rhythm to a subtly suggested or openly imposed temporality. To alleviate this widespread anxiety it is necessary to create the conditions for the emergence of non-logistic temporalities, generated within productive or semi-productive ('purposeful' might be the word) places. Here the notion of atmosphere as understood by Melissa Gregg seems pertinent: "atmospheres for social connection outside the temporal dictates of the organization". Throughout all of its relational qualities, it is space that modulates time in these places. But what time are we talking about? We might refer to "flow", a state of consciousness in which we lose awareness of measured time yet experience it fully. Generally a state of flow is reached at the individual level, and therefore the challenge is to make this happen on a collective level, allowing space

to disorganise time. This is perhaps the way to patch together what is now a fragmented civil coexistence.

It's also time to name the elephant in the room: neoliberalism. In the previous pages this concept has appeared only sporadically. Is this because there is no relationship between neoliberalism and the entreprecariat? On the contrary, as we have seen, some key figures of neoliberal politics like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher have worked actively to normalise entrepreneurship. Moreover, as Foucault remarked, the understanding of the individual as enterprise-unit is rooted in neoliberal thinking, particularly in Gary Becker's theory of human capital. Keeping neoliberalism in the background was a deliberate choice, perhaps a perilous one, motivated by the self-sufficiency of today's entrepreneurialism, a system of ideas that exceeds free market dynamics.

And what to say about art, considered by many as a bulwark against the invasion of economic reason? Although there are many artworks that speak out against the abuse of capitalism and the aberrations of the work ethic, the art world has also proven an innovative and industrious laboratory of ideas, subsequently converted within profit systems. This echoes what Boltanski and Chiapello call "artistic critique", referring to the alliance between social movements and groups of artists that was established in the late 1960s. The demand for autonomy, independence and nomadism raised by artistic critique was to a certain extent fulfilled, albeit in equal measure perverted, in the same way that the aversion to bureaucracies has itself become a bureaucratic pose.

One of contemporary art's favourite tools is irony, which according to Ulrich Bröckling is potentially capable, although only temporarily, of countering the entrepreneur-



ial self.<sup>22</sup> However, Richard Sennett throws cold water on the theory, by reminding us that irony is nothing other than a natural response to the impossibility, caused by flexibility, of constituting a narrative. The “ironic man” alienates himself from his path so as to withstand its meaninglessness. Irony becomes a way of coping with the disappearance of fixed points, an essential antibody in one’s existential adaptive immune system. If ironic detachment is an expression of irrelevance, is it possible to resort to an irony that works the other way round, to an ironic attitude that does not lead to immobility? In other words, is it possible to forge an *ironic attachment*, an irony that generates proximity and action? Such an attitude should result in a sort of meta-irony, which implies the ability and willingness to find the ironic detachment *itself ironic*, contextualising it on a social level.

“From great power comes great responsibility”, Uncle Ben warns his nephew Peter, better known as Spider-man. Appearing in various forms ranging from the Holy Scriptures to Roosevelt’s speeches, the warning indicates that power implies duty. The entrepreneurial spirit grants the individual a positive power, a power that is non-coercive only in appearance: the power to act. By contrast, another way of exercising power is contained: being able not to act. Being a call to action, entrepreneurialism is at the same time a condemnation of inaction as it is an untapped potential of unused capital.

Precarity, on the other hand, can be seen as a partial and open admission of powerlessness. Impotence is a quality with universally negative connotations and

<sup>22</sup> A case in point is a performance piece by British artist Max Dovey, who wore a Deliveroo uniform at Glastonbury festival to make visitors believe that they could get food delivered to their tents. As he later found out, the idea was actually being developed by UberEats. Dovey concluded that “disruptive critique of the platform economy only shocks once before the orders start coming in.”

therefore useful (*full of potential*) at a critical level. Admitting impotence means acknowledging the ideology of individualism, recognising one's own inadequacy and embracing interdependence, or, in simpler words, living with others. This admission, which relates to the discourse on ontological precariousness and ambivalent precarity introduced by Judith Butler, confirms the fact, underlined by Sennett, that dependence and independence are not mutually exclusive.<sup>23</sup> By way of completion, we can also bring into the equation Schumpeter, who despite putting entrepreneurs at the top admits their dependence on the workforce they govern: without a herd to coordinate, there is no coordinator. This is basically what Michael Hardt and Toni Negri stress in their invitation to set up an entrepreneurship of the multitude, an entrepreneurship that autonomously takes charge of production and social reproduction, but not in isolation. Some recent protest movements confirm the ambiguities surrounding the topic of independence and dependence: precisely in order to reaffirm their autonomy, the riders of the gig economy fight to ensure they are legally granted a state of subordination.

Claiming impotence does not mean giving up. On the contrary, it means tracing the outline of one's own

<sup>23</sup> "Precarity is ambivalent, because we are always dependent on other people, from the beginning, but other people can also harm us, so we need an understanding of ethics to cope with this ambivalence." (Judith Butler in her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*). Manifesting the entanglements formed by notions of dependence, independence and interdependence is no easy task. Such task requires a meticulous terminological and diagrammatic effort. Femke Snelting, member of the Brussels collective Constant, has been collaboratively assembling a vocabulary of terms and visual representations that relate to sovereignty, freedom, independence and autonomy. Snelting adopts a feminist perspective and focuses mostly on activist tech-communities. Among my favourite terms is So-and-Sovereignty, coined by Martino Morandi, which seems to suggest a reality check on the claim of autonomy promoted by entrepreneurialism. The evolving list can be found online: <https://pad.constant-zvw.org/p/interdependencies>.

limitations. Impotence does not even signify passivity because it means active recognition of vacuums of individual power; it is an invitation to cooperation and mutuality. Impotence implies a truce, it means setting down the weapons of competitiveness and strategic action. If the entrepreneurial spirit aims to suppress all expressions of powerlessness, the precarious spirit makes it its shared horizon, allowing in not only enthusiasm but also negative feelings and sad passions. Impotence is not an expression of cynicism, but the form of the relinquishment of a wicked asceticism, of an infinite outdoing of oneself against the self.

**THE SPIRIT OF THE ENTREPRECARIAT**  
**Afterword by Raffaele Alberto Ventura**

Every so often a good neologism is enough to make an author's fortune, and that's what we wish Silvio Lorusso. The concept of 'entreprenariat' encapsulates the central paradox not only of the labour market, but perhaps of the entire post-industrial economy. Scrupulously cited by the author, an ample literature illustrates how the growing 'entrepreneurisation' of the workforce is none other than a hidden form of precarisation. In short, it is the response of economic agents to a regulatory framework that offers waged workers *too much protection*, something which is becoming less and less compatible with the effective functioning of capitalism. Outsourcing employees as freelancers or suppliers therefore turns out to be a great way to avoid giving them proper employment. The logic of economic development at times diverges from the purely human considerations.

But, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys in this story? It is not only large companies that use similar devices, but above all the world of the entreprenariat itself. The entreprenariat has found in flexibility the law of its survival and in pleading poverty a safe way to cut costs and defer payments. While it is true that on the one hand precarious workers are forced to become 'self-entrepreneurs' in order to meet the needs of their clients, who cannot or don't want to hire them, on the other we know that small and very small entrepreneurs are themselves in an increasingly precarious situation: overwhelmed by competition, taxes, bureaucracy, new technology, the cost of credit... With all due respect to those who still believe they can draw a clear line between exploiters and exploited, it is difficult today to distinguish between a precarious worker-turned-entrepreneur and a precarised entrepreneur. Indeed, one might conclude that if the former is forced to become an entrepreneur, it is precisely because the latter is too

precarious to hire them, and that therefore they are essentially the same identical thing: two sides of the entreprecariat coin. Like a human centipede, each entrepreneur offloads the cost of their precarity onto the next link in the chain.

The tragedy lies here, in the inability to move from this transversal frailty towards cooperative solutions. But rather than do this, in order to survive every single agent agrees to participate in a downward race that has no winners. More and more companies, both large and small, are established year by year, but their lifespan is becoming ever shorter: “creative destruction” is accelerating. The great twentieth-century companies, whose ambition was to vertically integrate the entire value chain within themselves — so much for those who believe it was really the “free market” that enabled post-war growth — have given way to more flexible structures, able to outsource production segments but above all to outsource risks. If demand changes or technology changes, all the company needs to do is alter the supply chain: in any case it's not their own capital investment, human or otherwise. The entreprecariat galaxy is there to absorb all the aftershocks and frictions, the hindrances, the plagues of locusts, if necessary even the InDesign updates. No working hours, no protection today and no pension tomorrow.

The question arises spontaneously: what drives so many ambitious young people to invest time and resources in professional projects that are so thankless, in exchange for perhaps just a few crumbs of *status*? Perhaps Max Weber had the answer: it is the fault of *Beruf*, meaning, in German, ‘vocation’ but also ‘profession’, although this might run contrary to the experience of the many (creatives or restaurateurs, journalists or makers...) who do

not succeed in making their vocation a true profession, that is, one they can live off. Weber placed the concept of *Beruf* at the heart of his theory that Protestant ethic was a condition for the rise of capitalism: but his *Beruf* foresaw that vocation be matched with economic gain. The *Beruf* of the *entreprenariat*, instead, corresponds first of all to a need for *recognition*: to be a graphic designer, a stylist, an artist, a journalist or a writer, even at the cost of throwing oneself headlong into an already saturated market. Very foolish, as Steve Jobs would say: but one cannot resist *Beruf*. It is like imprinting, a second nature that we wear like a cross, an incurable disease that we have contracted by reading books and watching movies.

Survivorship bias leads us to forget that we are not all Steve Jobs, and, just like Weber's Protestants, we would need "infallible criteria by which membership in the *electi* could be known". In the absence of these, we all just race towards the precipice like lemmings. But let us be reassured: our sacrifice will not be in vain. Again in Weber's view, "Capitalism educates and selects the economic subjects — entrepreneurs and workers — which it needs". If this selection has ended up producing the *entreprenariat*, it is because the *entreprenariat* was necessary. Capitalism today seems to be experiencing at the same time a crisis of supply (the supra-consumerist hypothesis of the classical economists focused on this type of crisis, which is linked to the incidence of wage increases) and a crisis of demand (the sub-consumerist theory of the Keynesians): in its own way the *entreprenariat* solves them both in one stroke. As we have seen, on the supply side, entrepreneurship is a valid alternative to salaried work. But above all we must not underestimate the effect that an epidemic of vocations has on global *demand*. Because this growing

mass of microentrepreneurs that invests in semi-professional equipment and uses the services of other microentrepreneurs is doing something fundamental: *consuming*. Advertisers need photographers to carry out their campaign, photographers need graphic designers to set up their website, graphic designers need computer technicians, and so on. After all, it matters little whether this creative class really ends up producing something — it serves to transform its wealth of dreams and aspirations into spending, to give an extra boost to the economy.





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## Exit Strategy

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**NOTES**





**SILVIO LORUSSO (1985) WORKS  
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BLOG ([NETWORKCULTURES.ORG/  
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Entrepreneur or precarious worker? These are the terms of a cognitive dissonance that turns everyone's life into a shaky project in perennial start-up phase. Silvio Lorusso guides us through the entrecariat, a world where change is natural and healthy, whatever it may bring. A world populated by motivational posters, productivity tools, mobile offices and self-help techniques. A world in which a mix of entrepreneurial ideology and widespread precarity is what regulates professional social media, online marketplaces for self-employment and crowdfunding platforms for personal needs. The result? A life in *permanent beta*, with sometimes tragic implications.



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**Afterword by RAFFAELE ALBERTO VENTURA**

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